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*Writing for Children*



# *WRITING FOR CHILDREN*

*by Erick Berry & Herbert Best*

*Illustrated by Erick Berry*

*New York · The Viking Press*

*1947*

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"My first essays were anything but successful. My auditors heard my stories, and then walked away without leaving me any reward for my pains. Little by little I acquired experience. Instead of being carried away, as I had at first permitted myself to be, by the interest of the story, I made a pause when the catastrophe drew near, and then, looking around me, said 'All ye that are present, if you will be liberal toward me, I will tell you what follows,' and I seldom failed in collecting a good handful of copper coin. For instance in the story of the Prince of Khatai . . . when the ogre seizes the prince and is about to devour him . . . when the thunder rolls and the ogre growls, then I stop and say, 'Now, my noble hearers, open your purses, and you will hear in how miraculous a manner the Prince cut off the ogre's head!' By such manner I managed to extract a subsistence from the curiosity of men."

The storyteller in *Adventures of Hajji Baba*.



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*Writing for Children*





## *Just a Moment, Please!*

JUST a moment, please! Who are you? We are not sure this book was meant for you.

It was written with one eye upon a wide range of acquaintances, men and women, specialists and even authorities on their own subjects, who did not know how to adapt their material to a form suited to children; and for specialists in children, teachers and librarians and booksellers, who did not know how to apply their knowledge to story-writing. Most of them wanted to write. One or two were the rare human specimens who did not want to write but were forced to by the pressure of their friends. All had material which it would be a shame to waste.

Nothing hereinafter printed would harm a single one of them. Something, perhaps the economy tip on typewriter ribbons, might even benefit them. But there are two classes from whom we hope the book will be forever hidden:

Firstly, the man or woman who wants to write but has not, so far, fallen. Writers though we are, we are not blind

to the evil of our ways. We rob, not in the straightforward fashion of the criminal, but in ways as yet unpunishable by law. We steal the characters of acquaintances and even of friends, take from them their pet phrases, their favorite gestures, and make innocent editors the receivers of our stolen goods. Such is our warped mentality that, though we know it deceives no one, we consistently maintain the pretense that our paper dolls puppeting before their cardboard scenery are living characters who walk the earth; and we profit by the trick. No coiner or forger in his senses would attempt to pass good coin or bills for spurious; but so innate is the dishonesty of writers that we will take truth and fact to pad out our stories and shamelessly sell the whole as unadulterated fiction. Will you, must you, sink to this?

But secondly, there is another and even wider class for whom this book is not intended. We admit this with regret, for it will narrow the sales exceedingly. We ask you to submit yourselves to the following test before putting down your dollars. Ask yourself seriously one question; and asking, do not, we beg, allow the biased views of friends, parents, professors, or others to influence you. Examine your past history from cradle upward (if it has been upward), look yourself squarely in the mirror if you can, and ask, **AM I A GENIUS?**

Yes, or no, now? No faltering!

If the answer must be a reluctant YES, as we fear it may be, this book is not for you. We must protect ourselves. If all the geniuses become writers, as all too many do, there would be no reading public left. And we do not want this to be a book to end all books!

If, however, you're an ordinary working man or woman, there is no danger in you and your kind. You're just a

harmless minority, growing yearly rarer, more negligible. So go ahead and buy. At the present price of typewriter ribbons this book should save you its cost in ninety-three days, four hours, and some odd minutes with which we won't trouble you. If, by the time you have realized that the art of being a successful professional writer lies in saving money, you look about for further economies, buy another copy of this book; buy several more. Go ahead, we won't dissuade you. We are fiction writers, so let us come out with the flat assertion: **OUR ONLY AIM IS TO HELP YOU.**



## *To Begin With*

THE old-fashioned juvenile was often one of a series of mild adventure tales, slightly sweetened for home consumption; or a thin story with Uncle Henry or Uncle Paul ladling out heavy doses of information regarding the population of New York and Chicago; or a story about the making of glass and china or about the cathedrals of France. Even the adventure stories of Paul Du Chaillu, as exciting and authentic material as any modern author could pray for, were written with a "now little boys and little girls" slant that would cause the modern child to

slam the book shut on the second page. The few brilliant examples of juvenile literature that do not fall within these categories have gone on being best-sellers for three generations, and some are well into their fourth.

In the past ten or fifteen years the writing of books for children has grown into a specialized business that is well worth the attention of the beginning author. Some years ago an enterprising publisher started a juvenile department, quite separate from the educational and religious publications; ten or a dozen other publishers followed, and now there are nearly a hundred special departments for children's books, special children's librarians, bookstores for juveniles alone, a separate book review section in some of the big Sunday and weekly papers, besides younger editions of the Book Clubs, yearly awards for the best book of the year, for the best illustrated book of the year, for the best on the spring book list; and several monthly and weekly magazines which publish children's serials, articles, and short stories for various ages, as well as the Horn Book, published in Boston, which deals solely with juvenile books, authors, illustrators, and libraries. Some juvenile departments were curtailed during the worst of the war years, but are flourishing once more and will never again sink completely out of sight.

#### WRITING UP TO CHILDREN

Don't begin by thinking that the juvenile story is a poor form of adult writing. It is far more strict in its form and contents than any but the best adult writing. It is notable that at the beginning of the depression in the early thirties many well-known adult writers turned their hands to what they considered easy money, juvenile writing. So far as we

have been able to find out, though many manuscripts were presumably finished, very few have ever reached print.

It is not necessary for a juvenile author to specialize in writing for one age. Many of us have tried our hand at stories for the very young, at picture books and special articles, and at stories for high-school and junior-high ages. Also, it is impossible to draw a line of division between authors and artists; nearly all the best-known illustrators for children's books try their hand, at one time or another, at writing for a public that already knows their work; and many authors feel they can do a better illustrating job on their own books than the artist assigned them by the editor. This isn't a bad idea. Often the chastened author sinks back into his own medium. Or the artist, trained to a knowledge of what should be played up and what should be subdued, begins his job with a strong feeling for composition that is half the battle, whether it's composing a picture or the outline for a story.

(The adult reads for release and admits it. If his life is dull and flat, or if he thinks it is, he reads crime stories, detective stories, mystery stories, tales of adventure and travel, whether real or fictional. If he has that feeling of inferiority, he is apt to turn to stories of great men, either fictional or biographical. And if his, or her, life lacks romance, he can get it in novels. One explanation for the popularity of the unhappy story is that in a twisted sort of way it also gives release. The reader can lay down the tale with a feeling of superiority: life is brighter for him than for the characters he has just left, and so he becomes happier by contrast.)

(The child, perhaps even more directly than the adult, gets his release through books. Quite frankly he becomes,

while he is reading, the character he reads about. So he, or she, wants adventure, tales of far lands, tales with plenty of acclaim for the triumphant child hero who overcomes all obstacles, whether mental or physical. One reason that girls like boys' books more than boys like girls' books is because of the popularity, even in this day of feminism, of the male role in life. Even the modern little girl feels that her brother may have the best of it; perhaps she is wrong, but she will accept boys' stories to read; they give her a thrill that her brother cannot get from being a mere heroine.

So remember when you write for children to give them this release.

#### APPRENTICE WRITING

There are many ways to learn the trade of writing. Some authors seem to appear on the scene fully equipped with style and with matter suited to their vehicle. Or you will find that the beginning author has served a long term as storyteller to children, perhaps as a librarian with a story hour, perhaps as a kindergarten teacher who has begun to create her own tales for her small audience. Or as "mother of six" with a squirming tribe to keep interested and quiet. This latter, however, is not as good training as one would think; the authority and personality of the mother may have put over the story despite its technical faults.

Now to get down to you, yourself, the prospective author of a book for juveniles. You, sirs and madams, immediately divide into two classes: either you have a story you want to write, that is, a story that is just bursting to be written; or you want to write a story but haven't decided yet on what to write about.

In the first instance you'll try over your story against a

few simple rules. Here they are. Ask yourself these questions: "What? Who? Where?" And eventually, "Why?" The "How?" is of course your story.

"What?" and "Who?" mean what or whom your story is about. About toys? About fish? Pastimes? Ships, or shoes, or sealing wax? A farm boy or a factory boy?

"When" divides into "Is it past, present, or future?" And if it is in the past, "In what period of the past?"

"Where?" Are your fish in the sea, in an aquarium, or in a brook? Is your farm boy coming to the city? Or is he on a farm in Sweden or in ancient Gaul?

The minute you begin to answer these questions you begin to get somewhere. Why, for instance, have you decided to have your story in the past instead of in the present? Why are your fish in an aquarium instead of in the brook? And how did they get there? Why is your girl working in a factory, and how did she get there?

Do you know enough about some one special background, about the people in it and its local color, to write a story without making blunders which your juvenile reader will inevitably spot?

Does the story have a background and a plot that will appeal to children? And if so, to what age child?)

( In the second case, if you just want to write and are trying to find a plot, you may ask yourself: About what subject do I know enough to write with authority and keen interest? Squirrels? History? Homes? Boy Scouts? Arithmetic? And on which one of these can I write so well that I will appeal to a young audience?

Any of them can be made to appeal, of course. All of them have, at one time or another, been written about; but don't let that discourage you. Without much doubt,

you yourself have some bit of knowledge, unknown to others, that has not yet been presented to the young. If you can't think of a new plot, take one of the oldest known and see how it can be worked out against your background and your knowledge. There are dozens of these old well-tried patterns, all the way from Sindbad the Sailor, Ulysses, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk—you can think of many yourself.

### THE BASIC PLOT

Let's take one to start with, say, Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack, given the cow to sell in the market, as the last property of his widowed mother, is unable to make the sale, but on the way home swaps the animal for a handful of colored beans. His mother, exasperated, and, one feels, with some justice, at his stupidity, tosses the beans out the window; the next morning Jack climbs the vine, already grown to gigantic size. Thereafter he discovers a new country, slays the giant at the top, and, in some versions, marries the giant's beautiful daughter and makes off with the giant's gold. Quite a little success story.

But to the modern child this has a serious fault; it doesn't fit the cold facts of modern life and the present principles of living. It was just plain dumb of our hero to sell the cow for what, even to him, were just ordinary beans. In fact, one wonders how his mother ever entrusted him with the sale of the family's one remaining asset. To the modern child it wouldn't seem fair that Chance should step in and bestow such unmerited rewards on such a dimwit. Anyway, it's never happened that way to the young reader.

Well, take Cinderella then. Here there's more justification for what is still a quite disproportionate reward. Just

sitting at home and being good is no certain step toward winning the Irish Sweepstakes or becoming president of the firm. But Cinderella is one step ahead of Jack; she goes part way toward meriting her success by being sweet and gentle and kind, and she didn't moan about her hard luck.

The basis of the modern story for boys, and for girls too to an increasing extent, is just about a reversal of the Jack and the Beanstalk principle. The modern Jack has Fate, as a rule, working against, not for, him. And he overcomes this by his own resourcefulness, courage, and such other qualities as can be made reasonably appealing and not too smug.

Let's take Jack again and see if we can't make an up-to-date hero out of him, using the same ingredients, the cow and the beans. Jack and his widowed mother are left with a small dairy farm. For lack of capital it can't be modernized; the aging stock can't even be replaced. It's just a slow, hopeless, downhill path to failure and selling out. Jack takes a chance, sells his stock for what they will fetch, buys the very minimum of implements and a newly developed soya bean out of which he thinks he can get two crops a season.

The "giant" could be any one of half a dozen obstacles to be overcome. It could be a state reclamation scheme with crooked politicians who threaten to take Jack's land before he has an opportunity to try out his scheme. It could be a new railroad going through; it could be a blight for which he has to spray or dust, thus increasing his costs. It could even be unfavorable weather, though this is not so good since it is not something he can overcome by his own efforts.

But his careful planning, hard work, and the assistance of the giant's daughter help him through. Perhaps she is

the librarian in the little local library where he goes to read all he can on his subject. And she becomes interested in his problem. Probably he does not know she is the daughter of the town's crooked politician.

His success comes by his own efforts. He may have a successful crop. There may be partial failure of his crop, but through the interest of the girl he gets an opportunity to go away and study at an agricultural college. Perhaps his crop is a complete failure, but he has earned a chance to try again on a large scale.

This, boiled down still further, is, again, no more than a success story; the overcoming of one obstacle after another, which does not repeat the pattern too closely. And in the end come success and acclaim.

Our example, in order to retain the cow and the beans, had to be a country story.

But the cow might be the ancient family car in the city, not used since the death of the father. Sold to meet tuition fees. For himself? No, too selfish for hero. Make it tuition fees for his sister. Funeral expenses or hospital bills? No, too morbid for a juvenile book.

Shall we switch to Cinderella? She's a little easier and doesn't take so much changing to bring up to date. Her story could be very simple: the ugly sisters buy unbecoming dresses for a dance, possibly a high-school dance; Cinderella, because she's always had to make her own clothes, is quite a skilled designer and comes to the dance in a costume of her own designing. She dances with the captain of the visiting team. Some onlooker, a visiting adult, turns out to be from the big city and notes the striking design of her costume. Cinderella is offered a job designing for his firm.

There are in the end two rules that will direct your story. The first is to write about what you know. Only a strikingly good plot which is simply begging to be written, or a direct order from an editor, or the need to get out of a rut into which you have fallen—and you won't have done that as yet—will justify your learning the mass of detail that is necessary when you begin to write about something completely outside your own knowledge and environment. In other words, try out your plots against backgrounds that you know, and know *well*, using characters, real life characters, with whom you've grown up. You'll find that they'll have to be changed a lot, but this will give you something to start with.

The second general rule is to write about things which will interest your reader. This seems, at first, in open conflict with the suggestion that you write about what you know, because you are bored with the things and people around you and you want to write to get away from them. But aren't you forgetting that your reader doesn't live in your home town, doesn't know the people about whom you write? When he reads your story he goes traveling and meets fresh and exciting people.

And of course you are going to make your story a little more interesting than the real people, the background and the happenings, seem to you.

## 3



## *A Plot Is Hatched*

PLOT is more than the armature which rigidly supports the clay of a sculptor. (Plot is the framework or skeleton of a story.)

(Many writers of adult fiction, particularly of the more advanced character-study type, deny that they use a plot. What they may mean is that they give character reactions first place and that they are unconscious of using any plot. They do not knowingly clothe a skeleton with flesh nor build upon an armature. But you will find that you can usually dissect their stories and expose the plot structures on which they are based.)

Whatever you may do later, you will find it easier when you start as a writer to work out your plot first. This will ensure that you know where your characters are going and what they are intended to do. Without this definite plan

your characters will head off in all directions but the right one and get badly out of hand. They're like the man who jumped on a horse and rode off in all directions.)

(For juvenile stories we believe that a carefully constructed plot is essential. The young reader demands a clear-cut story and won't be put off with a muddled character sketch, however brilliantly phrased. He demands that we start the story in paragraph one on page one, stick to the story without wandering off to pick verbal posies, and finish up the story adequately and tightly on the last page. This calls for careful planning and disciplined writing. The planning is what we call plot.)

### OBSTACLE

The beginning writer, on being counseled to write about what he knows best, will almost inevitably ask, "But how am I to make a story out of that?"

The plot boils down to one thing—the attempt to overcome an obstacle or a series of obstacles. You can be almost sure that no obstacle, no plot; plenty of obstacle, plenty of plot. Maybe even too much plot.

#### DIFFERENT KINDS OF OBSTACLE

The obstacle to the hero may be a flaw in his own character, it may be the machinations of the villain, it may be the old mortgage. He may have a fight against time, or, as in an out-and-out adventure story, against one of the elements, earth, air, fire, or water, or against an animal. The plot can be thickened and complicated further by combining any two or three of these. The hero may have to fight the flaw in his own character, say cowardice, at the same time that he is shipwrecked, and so forced to fight the ele-

ment, water. An obstacle is therefore anything which holds the hero back from attaining his objective (If in the end the obstacle should win, the result would be tragedy. But tragedy has little place in juvenile writing.)

Let's take some classical plots and sort out the obstacles. For instance, *Alice in Wonderland*. While her goal is never very clear and has a true dreamlike quality, she is continually delayed from attaining it, or brought to a halt by growing too large or too small, too tall or too tiny; she is held back by one character after another. And in the end all her troubles are resolved and the obstacles removed by the discovery that the whole thing was only a dream.

In the Jungle Books, Mowgli's many adventures consist in meeting three or four different types of obstacles; his own fear, the opposition of the Wolf Pack, the menace of the Tiger, the villain which runs through all the stories. In Mowgli's fall from grace, when he is stolen by the Bandarlog, we have a perfect example of the hero mixing with bad companions for the sake of their admiration and so coming to grief.

(This sounds like talking round the subject. Let's get down to cases and go back to our modernized version of Jack and the Beanstalk. In normal life Jack would continue with his depreciating dairy herd, fate and circumstances being too much for him. But in fiction, modern fiction, man is master of his fate; Jack succeeds in overcoming the obstacles and puts the farm back on a paying basis by his own personal effort.)

#### RISE AND FALL

(It is only by keeping the issue doubtful for the length of a book that we can make a story out of it. And to hold the

reader's interest there must be rise and fall; slight progress, slight falling back, minor triumphs, minor failures. Here is where your obstacles come in.)

You will probably think of many obstacles; a farmer's life is full of them. But just any old obstacle won't do; you will need to select. Your first impediment can be one of time—that Jack engages to deliver the cattle for sale by a certain day and then circumstances make this all but impossible. But wait a moment. That's a check, true, but is it the one we want? Mightn't the first setback be his mother's opposition, or perhaps his own reluctance to take on responsibility in so important a decision?

#### PARENT NO OVERT OBSTACLE

Here we run into a peculiarity of the juvenile book. For some reason, perhaps because it is usually parents who choose the books for children, the parent must almost inevitably be represented as a pleasant and friendly person. You can drag in a villainous or unfriendly uncle or grandfather, but mother and father must back up the child. So if we wish to have Jack's mother against Jack's scheme, she must not be in open opposition to it. Perhaps out of loyalty she backs him up, but the boy feels her indecision and hence is more reluctant to undertake it.)

#### MENTAL OBSTACLE

This indecision seems a good obstacle to start with, since it serves to give character to the hero and also to his mother. Setting it in early like this means we can build on this indecision of his, to emphasize the extra burden that he bears when things go slightly wrong. Yes, that's good for a first difficulty. In our notes, as we write the story, we jot it down

briefly, and will probably type it out more fully before we start to write.

#### VILLAIN AN OBVIOUS OBSTACLE

Our next obstacle? How about that villainous uncle? Let's call him Uncle Bemus. He has a wooden leg and owns a farm near by and, of course, he's a rigid reactionary; he thinks things are well enough as they are. And yes, how about having him try to stop the sale of the cattle? Add a little meanness to his character somehow, otherwise your reader may think, quite naturally, that this experienced farmer, whose opinion agrees with that of Jack's mother, is right and that Jack must be wrong. (We can't have this in a juvenile book, so make use of people's illogical partisanship; make the readers dislike the uncle and they'll do their best to disbelieve anything he says.)

#### HERO MUST OVERCOME OBSTACLE

The uncle tries to stop the sale, perhaps by some legal trickery. Jack overcomes it. It would be easier if Jack's mother stepped in and took over this particular obstacle. But here we run into another peculiarity of juvenile writing. If Jack's mother did it, it would not be Jack's story nor his, even temporary, triumph. And our young heroes and heroines must be built up to more than life size, while the adult characters must be played down or left a little in the background of the big scenes. You see, there are two main things from which the average juvenile reader wishes to escape. He feels that he is, quite unfairly, smaller and weaker than the grownup. Time will cure this. But meantime he resents the fact that, however right he may be, an adult is *per se, ipso facto*, and all the rest of it, still more right. The

second thing is that, say what we will, infancy and the laws and customs relating to it parallel exactly the laws and customs of benign slavery. So let's give our reader a hero who throws off these shackles, justifies his revolt by results, and is vindicated by the approval of an adult.

Well, now we've got two obstacles: the hero's own character and the villainous uncle. During the course of the story we shall want others, some of which will be resolved during the course of a chapter, others which will carry over and be met with later on in the book.)

#### **ONE OR MORE OBSTACLES MUST CARRY RIGHT THROUGH THE BOOK**

If we have only a series of obstacles, each one overcome within the course of its particular chapter, we get a series of short stories linked together by one hero. This, for a long book, is not a good idea, though it is often a solution for the beginning writer if he wishes to sell his stories separately.

#### **TIME OBSTACLE**

There's the race against time, of course, and this is one of the most powerful obstacles. And in a farmer's need to get his seed in early and to harvest his crop on time, this race occurs naturally; we don't have to fake one. There's the much used race to get the money before the mortgage falls due, but we won't use that, it's too hackneyed. Perhaps Jack has to sell his first crop before it is harvested in order to rent the implements with which to harvest it. Undoubtedly he will have to hire help in harvesting. We won't put an actual race into this book, that is, where a man has to get to a given place by a given time, because this would be out of keeping with the slow struggle of man against season and

that sort of thing. Perhaps, because he has no capital for modern implements, he is plowing and harrowing by horse, and a much needed horse falls ill. Will he ruin the beast by working it unfit, or lose part of his crop? Quite an interesting dilemma between kindheartedness and the need to win through.

#### MINOR OBSTACLES

We can bring in a gang of thieves, we can have a fire in the hayloft, and any number of minor complications, some of which run only for a chapter or two, others which will be planted early in the story and work out to a complete success only toward the end. It is the skillful interweaving of these plot threads that make for a rich plot fabric.

#### SECONDARY PLOT

Now we come to our secondary plot interest. In order to keep the story from revolving entirely about our hero it is necessary to run a secondary character and a plot structure parallel to the first. Or even a third or fourth of minor importance. We have found it quite successful, in the twelve-to-sixteen age group, to run a boy's and girl's story together by having both a hero and a heroine and swinging the balance toward one or the other as the story progresses. This is a particularly successful scheme in books for girls, but not so good in stories for older boys, who prefer to keep their fiction clear of petticoat influence. As one young reader said, "More things happen to boys than to girls."

Suppose we overlay the Jack and the Beanstalk plot with the modernized version of Cinderella. Cinderella is working, temporarily and for the summer, in the college library, and Jack comes to her to help him get his books on soil con-

ditions, harvesting his bean crop, and so on. Cinderella is the youngest daughter of the crooked politician. (Hold on, if he's a parent he can't be too crooked. Shall we make him just misguided, not really knowing or understanding the conditions?) Her two older sisters manage to get all the attention and invitations to dances. Cinderella's real interest is in dress designing. Perhaps she feels that nothing in the way of special costume designing has been done for the modern farm woman; it's a subject she might even discuss with Jack's mother.

You can interweave Cinderella's plot with Jack's. Two or three of the obstacles can be obstacles for both characters at the same time. For instance, a friendship develops because she is driving by in her old car at just about the time Jack has to fetch the vet for his ailing horse. They discover that each is hesitating over making some important decision. Each bolsters the other's faith in himself, and Jack says, "Look here, I'll make this decision if you'll agree to go on with your costume studies."

#### SUBCONSCIOUS PLOTTING

But why, you ask, all this cold-blooded planning before we get down to the delightful business of writing? If you are at all lazy, about this time you will find yourself telling yourself that we are mechanizing an art, that all this planning will take away the warmth and feeling and spontaneity from the making of a book. Well, there are some people, greatly to be envied, who can take the makings of a book, a few ideas on characters, a few bits of scenes, and a general idea as to how things will work out in the end, and go for a walk with them; and by letting them turn over slowly, like the contents of a concrete mixer, come back

with the right ingredients properly contrived in the right proportions and ready for use. It is a method that is not to be scorned, especially in the construction of a short story. Some writers can even construct a reasonably full outline of a book in much this manner.

#### CONSCIOUS FORMAL PLOTTING

But for the novice, and even for the experienced writer, a well-plotted story has the advantage of steel-girder skyscraper construction; you can lay upper floors before the walls are built, write later chapters before earlier ones if your material comes to hand in the wrong order. Without a scheduled plot and lacking the framework into which things can be fitted in almost any order, you can only build brick by brick from the foundation upward.

Unless you're one of those easy writers whom nothing bothers, to whom interruptions mean no dislocation of thought, there's another and quite valuable blessing conferred by preliminary planning. If your plot warns you that you will have to do some research, say to find out what ails Jack's horse, or what kind of seed will produce two crops per season in the climate on Jack's farm, you can get this done before you start the actual writing of the story. With your tools and materials all arranged in tidy notes around you, you can immure yourself in your ivory tower and really get on with the job. Anyway, you think you can, which gives you much-needed confidence. And who are we to discourage you?

#### DON'T GET US WRONG

Plot is no Procrustean bed, to fit which characters must be lopped or stretched. It is the story of growth, with its

inevitable checks and setbacks; the development of characters in accordance with their individual personalities, good or bad; their interrelation, and their reaction to their environment.) But you must see all this clearly and in outline, before you even begin on Chapter 1, page 1.

#### PLOT REGULATES LENGTH OF STORY

A book, as a manufactured article, has an artificial limit to its size, hence there is imposed on the story an artificial limit of space. Careful planning in advance will enable you to fit your story to the size.

In the process of years the reading public has come to expect a certain pattern to its stories. Hence ~~you~~<sup>we</sup> cannot build to a climax in, say, three chapters and then return for a slow development in the remaining fifteen chapters to explain exactly what the climax resulted in. In addition, a book for children should be self-contained; every factor which leads to the final result or outcome should be there for a purpose. And no factor that leads to the final outcome may be sprung on the reader unexpectedly; it must be planted.

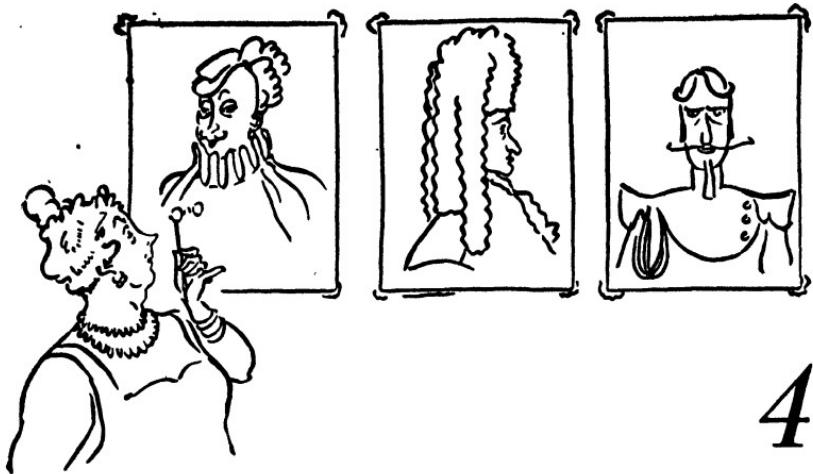
You have a dozen, perhaps a score, of such rules which must, and we mean **MUST**, be complied with. Do you want to be troubled with these when you are laboring over your actual building, brick by brick, word by word? If not, comply with them in your architect's plan, in your plot, and then forget about them. That is why we emphasize the advantages of the preliminary plan.

A whole novel is too long to hold in the mind as a complete entity, except in barest outline. A preliminary plan will enable you to divide the story into its component parts and allot each part to a rough, a very rough quota of words,

or pages. Thus, when the manuscript is finished it will not only be of about the right length, but the component parts will be of about the right proportion.

Without this dividing up of the story into measurable lengths it is all too easy to find at the end that your tale is too short, or too long, for its market. You cannot cut the end, or extend it very much without putting the whole out of balance. And when this happens the unfortunate writer finds himself up against the discouraging task of going through the manuscript again, for cutting or padding.

Whatever system you may decide to use later, we strongly recommend starting with a plan, as an engineer starts with a blueprint, a cook with a recipe.



## *Characters in Order of Their Appearance*

Out of your plot has begun to emerge a faint outline of your hero or heroine and perhaps of your villain. Soon you will set your stage, raise your curtain, and push your first character on from the wings. But, like a stage production, your book cannot be improvised as you go along. So let's go behind the scenes and see how, from your rough notes, you have built up these characters.

Where did you find them, these individuals? What and who were they, in the real life from which you have borrowed them?

Almost certainly, in a first book, the hero—or the heroine—is yourself. Or a projection of yourself. Or what you your-

self would like to be. But preferably not written in the first person. Young people don't like too many "I's." This may be because with the younger child the story is read to them, not by them, and the "I" makes the tale into the story of the one who reads aloud. Children say also that too many "I's" sound conceited.

So now we have your hero. But long before you brought him on the stage you jotted him down on a piece of paper.

#### NAMING THE HERO

First you tried to get a name for him, and this was probably the hardest of all. A good striking name will almost create a character, and there are at least four kinds of names which you will have to weed out. The name that is too common, too general—Tom Smith, Mary Jones. Everyone knows a Tom Jones or a Mary Smith, and hence your book character starts with a handicap, for he will be overshadowed by that actual living person. Then, unless you are writing a highfalutin character, keep clear of a name too highfalutin—Anstruther Featherstonhough and its equivalents in other languages.

The third, of course, is the old miracle play or *Pilgrim's Progress* type of name which expresses the essential quality of the character—Strongheart, Hopeful, and the like. Dickens used this trick, thinly disguised, in Scrooge and Uriah Heep, but it is no longer popular. Modern readers, even very young ones, like to form their own opinion by what you make the character do or say and object to having their characters labeled at the outset.

The fourth type of names to avoid includes those that have already taken on color by their association with people in real life or in fiction. Ferdinand, Scarlett, Hitty, Lind-

bergh, Alice—all these have too much personality for your character to combat.

Now that you have his name, as in our version of Jack and the Beanstalk, jot down under separate headings his appearance, his way of talking, his mannerisms, his personality, his background.

### HIS APPEARANCE //

To fit into the story, which is, say, a farm story, do you think he should be a little short but stocky? His heavy, slow-moving work would tend to make him that, wouldn't it? If he were too tall and thin and of too light a build, growing too fast for his strength, he'd scarcely have the mental and physical energy which he needs for the plot we've given him. He's not apt to be very loquacious either. His mind is a bit too busy, perhaps he's even too worried. (If we want to balance his silences we can have the heroine rather a rattletrap, trying to find a cheerful outlet in words for her feeling of frustration.)

Other details of appearance that should be considered are eyes, nose, jaw, and hair. You may not want to catalogue them all in your story, but you'll want a very clear picture of them in your mind. We'd probably make him rather broad of face, with a not too pronounced nose, a jaw rather broader than pointed or long, because this fits into a sort of composite picture we have in mind of actual people who have done or could do the things required by the plot.

Clothes? Why, take some regional costume which you know well. You'd naturally site the whole of your story in a farm region that you know or one to which you have easy access. And, from weaving your plot, you already know his background.

**HIS MANNERISMS**

His mannerisms or gestures may be drawn from those of your friends, or from casual movements which have caught your eye in the streets. They should, of course, fit this character and his mood.

Trick mannerisms are a little different. You can use a gesture as unmeaning as passing the hand over the hair or scratching an ankle with the toes of the other foot, and make it mean a lot. This is done by setting the movement early in your book, and might be a sure sign of the hero's rising (and of course righteous!) wrath. When the hero without realizing it repeats the gesture later, the reader is given a pleasant sense of expectancy: "Watch out now! Hero's getting good and mad!" Of course, such a trick gesture can be coupled with any emotion you choose, with his being puzzled, with his being pleased, with his being embarrassed by praise. For the best effect the hero should be quite unconscious of making the gesture or of its meaning to the onlooker.

Ordinary gestures and mannerisms extend to those methods of speech, of movement, and even, if you like, of thought, which belong to this character and distinguish him from others. They should be consistent, according to your observation of human beings, with the kind of man you are describing. For instance, the hands of a heavy-built farmer would not "flutter lightly." Nor would the elderly and prim aunt kick angrily at a chair-leg. Whatever the gestures, they should be used with economy and discretion; three or four times at the most during the course of the book should be sufficient to establish it in the mind of the reader; and be careful to use different words to describe it,

Santander Jones tossed back a long and inky forelock, dragged a chair beneath him. Aunt Eurania rustled into her seat. Persis and Oliver found places already set for them. Peletiah Parrott boomed out a grace that left no doubt of his gratitude to the Almighty for blessings past and to come and began to bail out soup with a mighty silver ladle.

#### DRESSING THE PART

/The feminine, even the adolescent feminine, reader demands of us a more detailed description of the characters, particularly the main characters, than does a man or a boy. In the matter of dress, this may be due in part to the greater uniformity of men's clothes, which do little beyond indicate income, and in extreme cases the job at which a man works. But women, even those quite immature, have begun to realize that their wider scope in dress may indicate a personality which they wish to appear to possess, or betray some characteristics which they would prefer to hide,

Jerusha's flaming head, the short curls bound with woven tape, caught the last western ray of sunlight; her wool shawl and dark sheep-gray frock were all of a piece with the twilight.

Or again:

Oliver's dark little cousin twitted a thick pigtail over her shoulder and rose to her feet.

Note how the description is fed in along with the action; it does not halt the story. These two examples are descriptions of girls, but, provided they occur in a girl's book, descriptions of male characters must give what to a boy would seem undue emphasis on clothing and appearance:

Captain Spicer's pink face beamed roundly from between festoons of white whiskers and snowy locks. Clad in spotless

Chinese silk that was as heavy as broadcloth, nothing less like a ship's captain could be imagined. In a gentle voice, stepping softly, he made the rounds of the dinner table.

Another male character in a book for girls:

Mr. Grinnel almost blushed with pleasure. He could blush, too, despite his silky, sprouting side-whiskers.

One famous writer has complained, in his memoirs, that he can never boil down his character descriptions to a paragraph or two, and it is notable in that writer's work that he sometimes takes two entire pages to get through his description, after which the bewildered reader is no closer to the character than before. So practice thumbnail sketches, as an artist would practice, in your notebooks. Simmer down your descriptions to as few words as possible—and as saliently Take, for instance, this passage from one of the stories in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*:

He was little, like his father, but terrible, with a nose like an eagle's nose and yellow eyes like an eagle. He rode tall war horses—roans which he bred himself—and he could never abide to be helped into the saddle.

The description fits a man who is almost always on horseback. It is from the surroundings that one gets the picture of the period, the Norman Conquest in England. In a later story, set twenty years after, the same character is shown much older. He is hopping about trying to clamber aboard his tall war horse, and now Kipling compares him to an old white hawk. These few phrases are almost the only description of the man, but he emerges as alive as any major character.

The feeling of the period is often enhanced by the description of the character, even by the choice of words used.

Looking up, I saw his features for a moment—a slight, pretty boy scarce above eighteen, with fair curls, and flushed cheeks like a girl's.

This is from *The Splendid Spur*, by A. T. Quiller-Couch, a story of England in 1642. A modern boy, even of the same appearance, would not be described as pretty, certainly not in a book for boy readers. Yet so "in the period" is the choice of the phrase that it does not offend.

#### HIS PERSONALITY

“Personality” is the sum total of the character’s appearance, mannerisms, speech, and what makes him do what we have planned that he shall do, according to the plot.

Of course, every character is drawn from life—but not from one life. To start with, you may compound him, quite consciously, of several people you know. He will look like Bill Jones. He will have a trick of stuttering when he is excited like Johnny Brown. He will like fishing and skating and have the same mental angle toward them as some other person you know. But when you have been writing for a time your hero will emerge less consciously as the result of observation and will develop far more from your subconscious memory, which selects the traits as they are needed from the card index inside your mind and sends them out to you. The more you write, and the harder you work at writing, the more does the subconscious office staff supply you with this material. It is part of what is called inspiration.

Now that you’ve made your page or two of notes on Jack, pin these together and put them aside.

**THE VILLAIN**

Who is your villain? Consider him in connection with your hero; their personalities must be somewhat complementary in order to give us the conflict we want. We've already started to call him Uncle Bemus. It's worth noting here that names of different characters must not sound too similar; if you can give the names different initial letters, it will help your reader to distinguish the characters at the beginning.

Uncle Bemus is your villain, so don't forget that his ingredients must be so concocted as to bring out the strong points in Jack, the hero. We've already given him a wooden leg. This starts a train of thought. Did the loss of his leg in an accident with a newfangled mechanized farm implement embitter him toward all innovations in farming? Don't necessarily accept this right away; play around with a few other ideas. Did he lose the leg when he was a small boy? And did this debar him from playing with other boys, turning him into a solitary old grouch who is really badly in need of human understanding? It's a good rule to let ideas play around in your mind whenever they feel like it.

Now how about Uncle Bemus's verbal tricks and mannerisms? His mannerisms will grow out of his personality and should serve to express it. And his personality will grow out of the needs of the plot. If slyness and dishonesty are necessary for the story, then Uncle Bemus can be sly. If, however, he should in the end prove to have been a misguided, lonely, and misunderstood human being, then from the very beginning of his entrance on the stage you must give a hint of this characteristic. Your characters must run true to themselves throughout the book; must not suddenly,

halfway through, switch over and be an entirely different sort of person. But if it is part of your scheme to show change of character, you must show also the reason for it, and the change must be slow and rational as it would be in real life, rather than a sudden switch. *Change can suddenly become evident, but it mustn't be a sudden change.*

It is always more fun to write the villain and other secondary characters than it is to create the hero or heroine. This is partly because in the old tradition the hero had to stand flawless above his surroundings. But it is a tradition that is now pretty well broken. As far back as *Little Women*, Louisa Alcott let her heroine really come alive, though she probably achieved that effect by not being aware that Jo was her main character. On the other hand, Lewis Carroll's Alice is almost any nice little girl; it is his subsidiary characters, his muzzy-minded White Queen, his Red Queen, the bad-tempered Queen of Hearts, the Duchess, that walk directly out of the pages.

The difference lies between the mild character to whom the plot happens and the forceful character who gets behind the plot and sets it spinning. Some of Carroll's characters have more personality than a juvenile book can easily carry. And Mary Poppins is an excellent modern example of the character who steals the stage. If your hero has begun to go dead on your hands, stand off and consider him. Is he taking an active interest in his plot? Or are you allowing him to sit by and watch it happen while he remains the impassive center?

#### PERIOD DRESS AND CHARACTER

Be careful in dressing your characters. In the younger books give them clothes that will aid their characters, and

that also, if you please, aid the illustrator. But keep their appearance sound and healthy and within the range of your small readers' knowledge, unless you give them something completely new, such as a pigtail, or kilts, or a strange pair of shoes. If you must put clothes on the animals you write about (E.B. dislikes them, but we know two excellent illustrators who adore animals in clothes), then keep them also suited to the character of the animal.

For the modern book it is well not to let too modern hats and dresses date your writing. This is especially true in books for girls. We have had to struggle with illustrators who would put a modish hat on a heroine who, we hoped, would last for many years. Stick to berets and caps, bare heads and simple dresses. If you give colors and avoid such changeable fashions as length of skirts, your young reader will, herself, fill in the details with her own imagination. For boy readers it is well to avoid detailed description of clothes unless the book is a period one and the characters are in costume. What period dress is to girls, period equipment is to boys. You can avoid all but the most superficial mention of clothes, but don't think you are going to get away with a hazy idea that the combined tableknife and weapon carried at the belt was maybe a dirk, or perhaps a stiletto, or was it after all a poignard? If you don't know, you must go to a library and find out. Don't attempt to dodge the problem. Among your boy readers there is an expert on every kind of weapon and armor which has been used throughout the ages. Nor can you even get away with a misstatement about the articulation of insects' legs; there's a juvenile expert on every kind of insect too, and just as fanatic.

**SECONDARY CHARACTERS**

You will treat secondary characters much as you did your hero and heroine; but you will choose them carefully, for their picturesqueness, for their ability not to overshadow the hero too lamentably, for their difference from each other. At any moment one of them may crowd to the center of the stage. Especially will you choose them for their usefulness in the plot. Beware of any character, no matter how interesting and amusing to write, who will not work for his living. That's the difference between fiction and reality; your story must be more selective than real life.

While you are making notes on your character, don't try to limit yourself to just such details as you intend to use in your book, but let your imagination play around and develop the personality into a three-dimensional figure. This doesn't mean that you need write an entire chapter about each minor character, but the habit of character sketching is one well worth cultivating; training in selectiveness will come later and with experience.

One difficulty you will discover is that your hero and heroine can't be allowed any greatly exaggerated characteristics. It would make it too hard for your reader to identify himself with them. But as your reader doesn't have to identify himself with subsidiary characters, these, without being actual caricatures, can be slightly overdrawn, a shade freakish; your hired man can be just a little quainter and more puckish, or a little more sullen and silent, than he was when you encountered him in the flesh. Or your Negro cook can be more unreasonable, or plumper, or speak with more authority than she would have dared to in her real-life world.

Beware of the stock character who is simply made up out of characters you have read in other books. The more striking these stock characters—the Southern mammy, the movie magnate, the New England spinster—the wider berth you should give them, and this is just as true in the juvenile story as in the adult novel.

Almost any story would have been different had your choice of characters been different. It is amusing to revamp a plot in your own mind by bringing forward this character or that to the footlight, and see how completely it would be changed.

#### INTERACTION OF CHARACTERS

As soon as you have a handful of colorful minor characters, try them over in your mind's eye. See how they will affect each other and affect and be affected by your main characters. This will help them to come alive, to behave like real people, and not just walk on and off the stage like a bunch of stuffed shirts. You've got to get to know them well, so well that, as though by their own volition, each one says the right words and performs the right actions.

If you don't get inside them, you will find they are acting out of character. You pull a string and your marionette makes a movement. You feed him a few lines of speech, and they don't really fit one character any more than another. The story keeps sticking and needs to be pushed forward all the time by the writer.

But once the characters have developed their own wills, prejudices, and habits, they'll come striding on scene with something they've got to say, with something they've simply got to do. They offer you a choice of incidents at every turn of the plot, happenings which fit the time, place, and people,

and give a nice air of inevitability. In fact, unless you watch them, they'll take over the story and write it differently!

#### **INTERACTION OF CHARACTERS AND PLOT**

Having introduced the characters to each other and found out a lot more about what they are really like, try them out in relation to the plot.

Since you worked out your plot first, and have had it in the back of your mind while roughing out your notes on character, the probability is that plot and characters will fit together nicely. Your characters are the kind of people who would do the things which the plot demands of them and who would have the various things happen to them.

It is really fun to write when your characters begin to take over the plot, when a character becomes so strong and real and three-dimensional that you can say truly, "That fits my plot, but it's not what he'd really do. Now, what would he **really** do?" and, "What is that character's reaction to this situation, or to this other character?"

Don't try to squeeze a character back into the plot if he won't go. That will kill him or render him so flat and uninteresting that he will never again be able to perk up his head and take things over for you.

All the big books that have lived have been based on one, sometimes more but certainly one, main character that came alive. Think back. Sometimes a secondary character stole the story, as Long John Silver stole *Treasure Island* away from the boy hero, whose name is rarely remembered. When an adult character takes over a juvenile book the situation is difficult to handle. (Incidentally, Stevenson's story, written as a juvenile serial, was not a success as such, since it was not actually a boy's story.) There are ways, of

course, of disciplining these adult characters. We had one such in *Go and Find Wind*. He was so alive that he tore through the pages, carrying all the plot before him. So we gave him a bad cold and put him to bed. He was just as human and funny in bed, but he didn't hog the stage, and did allow the others, the boy and girl, to get on with the day's work. That's one way of tellin' 'em. You'll think of others. Incidentally, we learned in that story never again to let an adult have so much to say. He was too near the hero and heroine; next time we had our adults keep offstage a little more.

#### NO SAINTS, NO SATANS

Don't try to make your hero a goody-goody. He's more likely to commend himself to the reader if he's like other boys, sound and sane, with some pretty maddening faults and weaknesses. The overcoming of these, if broadly and not primly presented, may be an interesting part of the plot development.

This is particularly true of the adolescent tale. A boy of that age reading about a character of that age, likes to find that the character, though to all appearances stupid and lazy, triumphantly disproves this in the end, to the surprise and admiration of dumb adults who could not realize it before.

Our villain too must be human, not a dweller in outer darkness whose every thought is evil. We are realists these days and even at an early age have discovered that bad little boys and girls, so presumably bad adults too, don't see themselves as bad, but as people whose motives are misunderstood. Even the worst criminals rationalize their actions as a blow struck against a mistaken social system. They may

even glorify themselves as Robin Hoods. Though we can't go the whole way in juvenile writing and make our villains mere problem cases of social maladjustment, we can give them more sane and normal characters than they had in earlier writing.

#### **CHARACTERS IN YOUNGER BOOKS**

Characters in younger books, for readers up to twelve years of age, should retain the same qualities throughout. There is no space in the shorter wordage for adequate character development, and the very young reader would only be confused by a shift in personality.

The younger your reader, the simpler must be the plot and cast of characters. Except in the case of the henny-penny type of story where constant repetition of the names of the players forms a pattern, it is well to keep to as few characters as will carry the action. One character for the youngest book; two or three, say, the conventional sister and brother with a background parent or two, for the six-year-olds. And gradually enlarge your cast as the age of the reader permits.

#### **PARENTS AS CHARACTERS**

We have heard critics complain that there are so few parents as acting characters in juvenile books. But any critic who tried to write a juvenile book would soon discover the reason. If the parent starts to enter the story he soon dominates it. A grandmother or grandfather, an aunt, uncle, or guardian, can be sidetracked conveniently, but a parent seems to have to be on the spot all the time. And hence he is a check to adventure. The orphan child, in fiction at least, has it easier.

Take, for instance, two good historical examples. In *Little*

*Women* it is when Marmie is away, out of the house, that most of the adventures take place. This is because, in her absence, the girls can and do take the center of the stage. And in that hoary old tale *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Grand-father, because of his more amusing character, takes the stage away from Dearest, Cedric's mother. Anyway, Cedric was half an orphan. It is the conflict between Cedric and his grandfather that made the story. Perhaps if Dearest, with her sugary sweetness, had been dropped out, the book would be alive today. The unpleasant or objectionable parent, though he may exist in real life, is taboo in the juvenile book as the father or mother of the central character. Sometimes he occurs offstage as the parent of a secondary character.

#### CHARACTER COLORED BY ENVIRONMENT

A character seldom thinks or acts in the way the writer in the same circumstances would act. This point in character work is of such importance that it is surprising how little it is realized. When dealing with characters and with situations not our own, it is important to drop our own views and take on those of the people of the time and place of the story. For instance, a girl accustomed to going barefoot except in winter may possibly be thrilled by the first shoeless steps in spring, but at other times will be unconscious of any particular emotion with regard to barefootedness, any more than you are conscious of wearing shoes. And a native boy of the Sahara desert would not react as you would to the great heat. It is true that many native tribes travel by night in order to avoid the sun; but don't make the boy rebel against the discomfort of heat just as you yourself would rebel. Our pioneer fathers did not, so far as we can dis-

cover, judge food and odors according to a modern's finicking taste and smell. The reaction of your character to dangers, minor ailments, and so on may be quite different from your own if he was not brought up on Pure Food and Drug laws, Sanitary Departments, and Safety First signs.

If you're a man, or if you're a woman, be very careful about the feelings and thoughts you attribute to the other sex. Fat or thin, undervitalized or healthy, placid or jumpy, every such condition affects your characters' words, thoughts, actions; as does his or her race, culture, and the age in which he or she lived. We can't keep all this in mind throughout a long book; but by drumming into ourselves some salient differences of the characters' way of thought or action when we are doing the preliminary plan of him, we will often set him off on the right lines and save a heap of later trouble. /



## *The Camera Angle*

Now, we assume that you've got your notes assembled, your notes on plot, on background, on characters. You should be, you think, about ready to write. But there are a few more points to take up before you slip that first virgin sheet into the typewriter and twirl the roller and tap out "Chapter One" at the head of the page.

### **WHAT PERSON TO USE**

The first point to be considered and decided upon is whether you are to tell your story in the first person, the second person, or the third.

The *first person* once was very popular with those Victorian writers who wished, by using it, to give a convincing air of its really having happened, to what was otherwise pure

fiction and adventure. Sometimes it was autobiographical in form, starting something like this:

I was born in the year 18—, of modest though by no means impoverished family in the little village of B—— in the Valley of the T——. But early my desire for adventure asserted itself; and through my association with evil companions . . .

You can see for yourself that this form is far too egotistic for the modern young reader, partly because the character is relating his own life.

But there is a place for the first-person story. If the reporter is only a modest Boswell to the hero's Johnson, the first person can be really effective. It was extremely telling, for instance, when Watson related the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, serving to build up the hero in a way that could have been done only through the eyes of the friend of that hero. When for purposes of comedy, as in *Ben and Me*, the reporter wishes to be truly egotistical, then the first person is obviously the only form to choose. Or it can serve as a form of reminiscence, as in *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*, where the reporter is a doll, and where the egotism does not affront the reader.

The first person has one great drawback: that the narrator has to be maneuvered into position before he can report on an incident; or else the incident has to be told to him, and by him to the reader, which is often roundabout and clumsy.

The second-person method has not, so far as we know, been used in juvenile fiction, though it is used in magazine articles. To tell the reader, "You were born in the year 18—, of modest but by no means impoverished family, but early your desire for adventure asserted itself . . ." has a weird

effect. It is as though the narrator were the old-time lawyer talking to the missing heir. Or as though the reader had lost his memory and was being reminded by a psychoanalyst. Even using different material, the "you" method would still be more than quaint, and very boring after a time.

The *third-person* method is by far the most convenient to use and has come to be the standard. In this, characters, including the hero, are referred to in the third person or by name. It is best to write your first book in this generally accepted method, and, if you wish to, go on to experiment with the first and second persons later.

#### ANGLES OF PRESENTATION

An important classification of angles of presentation, or viewpoint, is worth working out from a study of the works of other authors. As we see it, these different viewpoints can be grouped into five classes. You may disagree with this grouping, but we find it convenient to use when collaborating. One of us will say to the other, "Why not use O.A. (Omniscient Author) and condense here?" Or, "Can we slip in a bit of modified S. of C. (Stream of Consciousness)? It would be quite effective here." The terms save us long-winded explanations, and the attempt to classify has helped clarify our ideas, and, we feel, achieve our effects with greater certainty.

#### STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This method is as though the thoughts passing through the mind of one character are recorded, without editing as to grammar, or censoring as to morals, by some as yet uninvented scientific instrument which is connected directly with the narrator's brain. It is an unreal method of writing,

but one which to the reader appears real, since the reader has himself been conscious of such streams of thought and feeling passing through his own mind.

The Stream of Consciousness method gives an interpretation that is as personal as possible, and as biased. It stresses emotions and is short and jerky in style, since thoughts seldom occur in neatly rounded sentences. And it stresses impressions received through the more primitive senses of smell, touch, and taste more than is usual. It is, in a word, highly "subjective."

Down hillside . . . Ma ahead of me . . . and Pa . . . overalls new . . . smell new . . . stiff . . . scratchy . . . stop thinking about them. The tune goes . . . the tune goes . . . finger it silent-like on the fiddle . . . nobody to hear . . . not Ma . . . not Pa . . . not Billiam . . . dogs has got long ears. Shoes tight . . . shoes tight . . . take them off . . . when dark. Billiam no danger . . . telling me . . . Billiam's a dog.

It is used in adult books rather as a stunt, perhaps to bring out the unspoken, and all but repressed, thoughts of which a person is himself barely conscious. Within its strict limitations, it is a very effective method. It is also very tough reading, calling for more careful concentration than the more standard methods of writing, with their complete sentences.

Obviously it is unsuited to the general run of juvenile stories. It can, however, be used for an occasional paragraph or two in high-school-age books where you want to dip briefly but deeply into the emotions of a character and where its use breaks up a tedious sameness.

#### REPORT BY CHARACTER

This differs from the Stream of Consciousness method in that the character tells his tale in a normal manner. It is as

though the writer had put the character in the witness box. Where the story mainly concerns the character who is telling the tale, it will have much of the appearance of an autobiography. Where the teller is a minor or disinterested character, the effect will be much like that of a newspaper report or an account by an eyewitness.

The method can be as subjective or as objective as the writer chooses. But if it gives the feelings and thoughts of the character who tells the story, these emotions should be told by the character, not interjected in the manner allowed to the Omniscient Author (of whom we write later). /

To distinguish this method from that of Stream of Consciousness, let us rewrite the former example in Report by Character form.

I went down the hillside with Ma ahead of me, and Pa too. My new overalls were stiff and scratchy and I tried not to think of them. I said to myself, "Now if I was just to finger the tune . . . Nobody would hear, nobody. Not even Billiam." And then I thought about slipping off my shoes as soon as it got dark, and that Billiam wouldn't tell on me.

In the instance we have taken, Irby is the character reporting, so the report is in the first person. Had the report been by Ma, she could have reported only what she had seen or heard, with the result that Irby's thoughts could have been reported only if Irby had told them to Ma.

I looked back and saw Irby coming down the hillside behind me and Pa. He told me afterward that his new overalls were scratchy and he was trying not to think of them. But he was wishing he could finger the tune, just finger it. No one would have heard, not even Billiam, he told himself. And his feet hurt, so he was waiting for dark to come, so he could get off his shoes.

We haven't done it here; but this character report could be made much richer by using the character's own phrases and even dialect and also by using his bias, his personal slant on people and incidents.

#### OMNISCIENT AUTHOR

This is when the narration is done by a third person, i.e., one not on the stage and who, moreover, knows all and sees all. All trace and all coloring of the person who represents it is omitted and just the materials presented.

Irby could not know that this tune, tingling in his throat and in the tips of his fingers, was to earn him a real new fiddle, and even money for a collar for Billiam, now faithfully trailing at his heels.

Omniscient Author can see around corners and is aware of things that happen to different characters at different places at the same time. He can enter into the minds of all his puppets and tell the reader their thoughts and emotions, and also matters beyond the ken of any characters.

It is the oldest of all methods, the simplest and easiest to write. But nowadays, except in books for the very young, it is used less and less. Because of its tendency to hop from character to character, it often fails to give a single-minded picture; the reader becomes confused with too many opinions. It often results in a muddled and colorless picture, and, gravest defect of all, in didactic writing.

It is so easy to impose the writer's judgment on the unfortunate reader instead of laying before the reader evidence on which he may form his own opinion. For instance, the careless Omniscient Author states that our hero is generous,

thoughtful, kind to animals, but has a quick temper which he finds hard to control. Naturally the reader resents this. He wants to exert his own judgment, put his own interpretation upon what he sees through the eyes of some other character perhaps, or even through the mental workings of the hero himself, or through actual happenings in the course of the story. He wants to picture the hero as being all these things, being generous, thoughtful, and kind to animals; and having difficulty, in a scene staged around that emotion, in controlling his temper. This will enrich the story and give one plot a chance to continue to grow out of character, since in order to show these things you will have to weave them into the fabric of your story. Besides which, if the reader has had a chance to form his own judgment of the hero, he is likely to be far more convinced than he would be if O.A. tried to sell him the hero in advance.

In the older books, down through Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales*, you will get plenty of examples of O.A. Here is a good one from one of Cooper's books:

As Deerslayer and his companion rowed with the energy of those who felt the necessity of straining every nerve, and Hetty's strength was impaired by a nervous desire to escape, the cause would have quickly terminated in the capture of the fugitive had not the girl made several short and unlooked-for deviations from her course. These turnings gave her time, and they had also the effect of gradually bringing both canoe and ark within the deeper gloom cast by the shadows of the hills. They also gradually increased the distance between the fugitive and her pursuers, until Judith called out to her companions to cease rowing, for she had completely lost sight of the canoe.

(Now, boys, pull that boat back and start again!) Yes, it's pretty ridiculous, isn't it? But if the author, before he started to write, had made up his mind just what point he wished to bring out and then shown the scene through the eyes of one character only, he would have made it coherent and the whole matter would have been clear. This is the greatest danger of O.A. The author, seeing through too many eyes and minds at once, gives too many viewpoints, and the scene becomes so scattered as to be almost unintelligible. Perhaps today's objection to the favorite writing angle of the past is that discipline is now required not of the reader, but of the writer. The harder the writing, the easier the reading.

But the Omniscient Author is a dispassionate, objective observer. He does not have the power to move the reader in the way a Report by Character can. The Report by Character has all the human frailties of prejudice, whether of love or hate, cunning or stupidity. Here is the Irby incident in the dispassionate Omniscient Author version:

Irby was following his mother and father down the hill. He was trying very hard not to think of his new shoes, which felt stiff and which squeaked when he walked. His overalls, also new, were stiff and scratchy. He wanted to finger his tune as he walked along, he knew that nobody would hear him, not even Billiam, Billiam the dog who was snuffling at the unfamiliar smell of new leather heels. When it got darker, Irby thought, he'd slip off the new shoes, as far as the schoolhouse. Billiam, being a dog, wouldn't be able to tell on him.

For many years authors limited themselves either to Report by Character or to narration by Omniscient Author, each with its definite limitations.

**THROUGH THE EYES OF CHARACTER**

This is the equivalent of Report by Character, but in the third person, not the first. It has the biased or "colored" effect of Report by Character but avoids the danger of alienating the sympathy of the reader, as sometimes happens when a first-person report makes the reporter appear too egotistical. It must, however, be limited entirely to the one mind and must in no case go beyond what the reporter has himself seen, or heard, or had told to him.

**OVER THE SHOULDER OF CHARACTER**

Finally we have the most popular method now used, at least for juveniles. It is a hybrid method, but effective.

Following Ma and Pa down the hillside, Irby tried not to think of his stiff, squeaky new shoes, and his new blue overalls, which were hard and scratchy. Nobody would hear it if he just fingered the way his tune went on his fiddle, as he walked along—not even Billiam, snuffling at the unfamiliar smell on new leather heels. If it got any darker, Irby thought, perhaps he could slip off the shoes until they got to the schoolhouse. Billiam wouldn't tell.

This is O.A. telling what is happening both inside and outside of Irby's mind. But he has borrowed a trick from Report by Character, coloring the description by using Irby's kind of words and phrases. It is more limited than pure O.A. method because the author can no longer go into the mind of more than one character. The narrator can, of course, switch over to another character *in another chapter*, or can, in an extreme case and for a very sound reason, split his chapter into two parts, one over the shoulder of

Character A, and the other over the shoulder and colored by Character B. But he cannot hop about from the thoughts of one character to the thoughts of another, sometimes even in one paragraph, as can Omniscient Author.

It is a method we have found the most convenient of all. It combines the rich effect of being able to see and describe everything through the personal angle of the chosen character, with the power of O.A. to go beyond the strict limits of what that character is aware of. And if you shift, you must shift with a purpose.

The younger the reader, the more single and unvarying must be the viewpoint, for the sake of simplicity.

The Through the Eyes of Character and the Over the Shoulder of Character give a richness and depth which more than compensate for the loss of omniscience of O.A. Loss of omniscience can largely be overcome by skillful plotting, which brings all that happens within the view or knowledge of the reporting character. You can, by these two methods, get within the skin of your reporting character, with all his personality and personal prejudices. The skillful writer can even achieve an effect from the character's inability to see what the reader can deduce from the evidence given.

#### SUMMING UP

Arranging these angles of vision according to an ascending scale of purely objective to purely subjective, from omniscient vision to limited vision, they are:

- Omniscient Author
- Over the Shoulder of Character
- Through the Eyes of Character
- Report by Character
- Stream of Consciousness

During the course of an entire book one can use all of them, for each has its value. Don't be afraid to try experiments, don't be afraid to try first one, then another; practice writing the same scene in each in turn and see what effect you get. But whichever combination you use in the end, use it knowing what you are doing, and why you are doing it. Either because that particular camera angle suits the mood, or because it gives or shuts out something you wish the reader to know, or not to know as yet. Or because it is the most effective break in a scene too uniform.

#### PERSONAL SLANT

The same scenes or incidents never appear alike when seen through the eyes of different characters in a book, just as no two (honest) witnesses to a street accident agree on all points in their account. Each individual has a different "slant" on things, is receptive to impressions of one sort, immune or indifferent to impressions of another sort. So, if we want our characters to appear real, we must, as it were, slip different colored lenses before their eyes, as a photographer uses color filters to change the values of his light and shade.

As a photographer chooses his filter, so you must choose your character to "filter" your scene. Usually you will choose the one who will see things most fully and richly; though if you need to condense this part of your story, you may select the opposite, a character who is unusually unimpressionable; or you may alternate between the two for contrast, if you do this knowingly and skillfully. For some reason you may want to use a character who sees things as does a cheerful extrovert; or as a troubled introvert. But, like everything else in writing, your selection of the character must be done with a definite purpose.

Suppose you need to describe a horse race. A jockey, a spectator, someone hearing it over the radio, or even a horse, may be your selected "filter." None of these would, none of these could, give the same account.

If your character, to take an extreme instance, were a blind man, you could not describe what he saw; you would use his sense of touch, of scent, of sound. If your scene is being written through the eyes of a small boy, he would not be likely to notice the clothes of the women around him; if through the eyes of a small girl, she would be alert to the things which have a natural appeal for small girls. If your character is hurrying, ill, frightened, under strain, allow for this. A quite common mistake is to tell the reader that your character is in a hurry and then spoil the effect by slowing down your action while the character notices so much that he seems to be gazing around him, perhaps making an inventory.

Give yourself some examples to practice on, like this tennis game. (This is adult in tone because juvenile writing is more restrained and does not afford such clear examples.)

The old dame kept pushing the ball back. Just bouncing it off her bat. Sockol Bingo! It was the young one who was trying to knock the stuffing outer the ball. Aw jeez! She's hit the tape. "Yessir, program, all the names of the players. Your quarter's change . . ." Holy Moses, she'll never . . . yes she has . . . a beaut down the side line. But the old gal's got there on her crutches and dug it up again.

#### Or another viewpoint:

They might call it tennis, but really . . . One's sympathies were naturally with the older woman, who was at least dressed in some semblance of womanhood. But the younger one . . .

No wonder Charlie went to these games, but at least he might have warned one. No skirt, only those all too brief shorts. And a shirtwaist which—well, really. . . . Perhaps it was because the poor girl was hot and moist, but it was her own fault for running about so. . . .

Or again:

Worth looking her up on the program. Miss Dorothy Hanwick. Don't know the name, but we will in a year or two. Beautifully controlled dipping cross-court shot; short and with plenty of top-spin for a good kickaway. Her flat chop down her opponent's backhand very sound. A perfect backhand smash from the halfway line; most unusual, that. The full bag of tricks forehand and backhand. Covered the court well, too, with her footwork. But the old war horse was extending her, pushing everything back, making no mistakes, outguessing the less experienced opponent. Age and strategy versus youth and technique. Age would probably win—this season. Poor old war horse with her neuritis and the sympathies of the crowd always in favor of youth. But old-timers had guts, yessir, guts! They had to have!

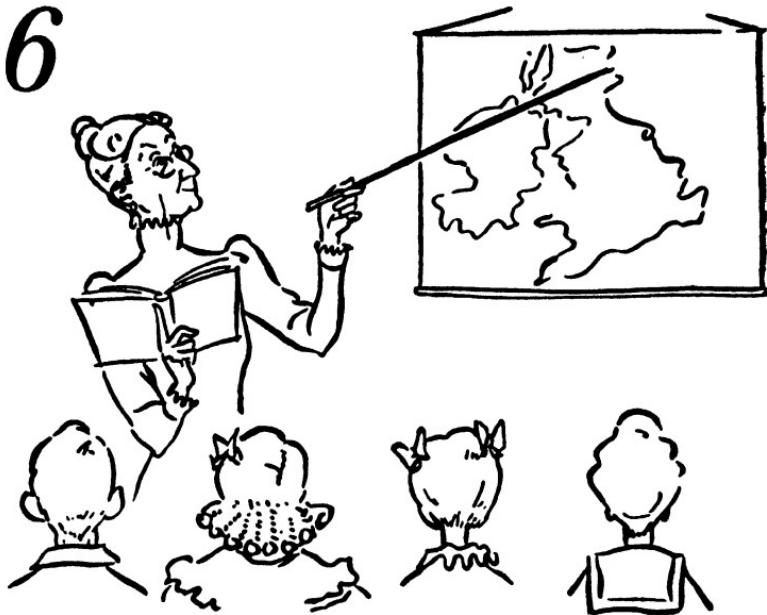
Well, go ahead. Make samples for yourself. Take those twin sisters you saw in the subway and describe them through the eyes of the very young law student who was watching them; and through the eyes of the aged cleaning woman who sat opposite them; and the eye of anyone else you happen to think of—your father, Aunt Jane, yourself. Then give the twins' discussion, in whispers, of the law student, or whoever it was who was making them giggle.

This viewpoint writing, or color filter trick, was not much used until recent years. Perhaps we are beginning to use it too much, or often too crudely. But it is surprising how

it gets over with a reader, prejudicing him (as we intend to) in favor of this character and against that, suggesting that old Abner is not such a crusty curmudgeon as he pretends to be; or that Little Sweetness and Light is really a hard-cored little gold digger.

So far, it is like a form of propaganda to which the listener has not yet developed persuasion-resistance. So let's use it, as long as the going is good.

# 6



## *Locale*

YOUR characters must live their lives and perform the actions required of them by your plot at some definite point in time and space. We have sketched the characters, thus answering the question "Who?" We have outlined the plot, thus answering "What?" Now there remain "When?" and "Where?" for us to answer. In other words, we must decide upon the time and place at which the events are to occur. This time and place is what we call "Locale."

### **LOCALE LIMITS PLOT**

Whether you write about ancient Egypt or modern Middletown, the plot is limited to the things which could hap-

pen there. Clearly you can't write of an elevator strike in ancient Thebes; and a lion hunt by a long-dead Pharaoh would be implausible in any state of the Union. Only the simplest embryo of a plot, a greatest common factor of but a few lines, would at the same time apply to a locale on a Maine farm, an island of the Caribbees, and a bungalow in California.

As soon as you find yourself saying "I'd like to write a story about" a certain locale, you are placing limits upon your plot. But many ideas for stories start that way, locale first, and plot made to fit it later. Your locale may be an engine house, a haunted house, a vacant lot where boys play ball, a plantation in Jamaica, a palace of the Middle Ages; the scene may be laid in Italy, in Damascus, in Cornwall, in a factory, in an underground cave. All these have been used and will be used again.

If, for time, you choose the present, and for place your own home, you'll still need to make notes. You must jot down the things which are so well known to you that you're in danger, just for that reason, of forgetting to tell them to the reader, who lives, presumably, elsewhere.

If, for time, you choose some other age, and for place some other country, your notes will naturally need to be more elaborate, because there is still more which you must remember to tell your reader once you have discovered it for yourself. Suppose you have hit on ancient Egypt as the answer to "When?" and "Where?"; you first read widely and without too much attention to detail to discover the exact period and place which will give best scope to the plot you have in mind. (And while you are doing this, try to absorb what is vaguely called the "atmosphere"; in other words, do your best to lay aside the ideas and prejudices of

your own environment and take on the different values of that earlier time, that different place; try to feel as your characters would feel. We know this doesn't come under the heading "locale," but you can't start doing this too soon.)

#### PLOT LIMITS LOCALE

This is so for exactly the same reason that locale limits plot. If, instead of taking our locale first, we take a ready-made plot such as our Jack and the Beanstalk, we will see how this happens. To start with, the action must take place in a farming country, where there is poor grazing for cattle, and where the soya bean has not been tried out, though the climate is suitable. And that's not all. Jack's farm should be neither too far from a small town nor too near. If it is, say, fifty miles away, he can't without neglecting his work meet the heroine often enough; nor would he be likely in these days of trucking to drive his cattle to market on the hoof. If it is too near we should be forced to load down the story with all the background and life of a small town, and that would be a quite different story.

As to "When?" the plot sets a period in time; for instance, in the matter of tools and animals, the type of house in which Jack lives, the methods of agriculture, and in the mere matter of transportation. You could not write a story of a Maine farm in 1700 and write of tractors and Fords. Nor could you write of a modern farm and omit them altogether; even if it were a small farm with no mechanized tools, the farmer's desire to have them or his hatred of them or his envy of others for possessing them would dictate in some part the mood of your story. Your animals, too, will be dictated by the point in time. A farm in ancient Egypt would not have horses, a late introduction, which were then

reserved for the nobles for war. A farm in Mexico would have not horses but burros.

#### VARY YOUR LOCALE SLIGHTLY

In setting the stage for your farm story it may be that you will want to take Jack away from his farm for a few chapters. Don't limit your scene to one continual stream of farm life. Lighten the book, as a movie is lightened, by a change of scene. Don't just let Jack sit down in one place while things happen to him. Take him, of course, to the fair, where he sells his cattle. Then take him, perhaps, to a local dance; and whatever you know most about—high-school dances or grange dances or the old-fashioned country dance which still exists in all its picturesqueness—will dictate the scene you choose. And dictate also the range and movement of your plot.

#### ADJUST PLOT TO LOCALE, LOCALE TO PLOT

If you want to include a certain scene that has appealed to you, you can often adjust your plot to include it. Your plot is not sacred, any more than your locale. Fit each to each so as to get the best from both. Once you have got into the swing of writing, you will find that plot, characters, and locale grow in your mind together even though you write their notes out separately.

Whatever story you may choose to tackle, it is likely to occur to you in much the same manner.

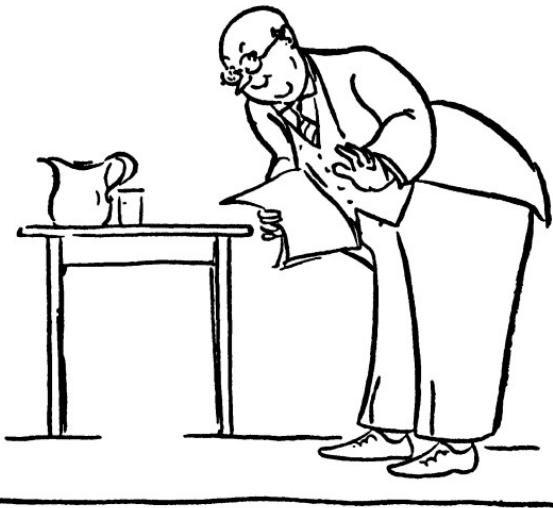
#### PLOT, LOCALE, AND CHARACTER

What we have to suggest now, is, we regret to say, a little confusing. You have seen how locale depends upon plot, and plot upon locale. Plot also depends upon characters, char-

acters upon plot; characters upon locale, and locale upon characters. We have done our best to separate these, as though plot could be written first, characters conceived, and locale superadded. But once you had begun to write, you would find that this cannot be done. The three are interdependent, each modifying the others, each enriching the others.

So when you are typing your first notes on plot, keep in mind your locale. Jot down in a penciled note beside your typewriter any suggestions of locale which occur to you while you are considering plot. And unless you have an incredible memory, have another sheet within reach for penciled jottings with regard to characters. As you type up your penciled notes on locale, tie them together and elaborate them, and you'll find further ideas about plot which will call for penciled scribblings on those neatly typed pages. And, of course, you'll have locale-influenced addenda for your notes on character.

Some writers even prefer to consider locale in the guise of a character, more or less passive, but always there, always exercising an influence upon the other characters. This ubiquity of locale has made it necessary for us to refer to it when dealing with plotting and with local color. The different ingredients which go to make a story may be indicated, but they cannot be separated clearly, for they are all interdependent. It is what makes writing an art; it is also what makes the writer tear his hair.



## The Opening Paragraph

SET your first scene as early in the story as you can. The first line is none too soon. Stories for the very young, designed to be read aloud, used to begin "Once upon a time there was a . . ." That "Once upon a time" had its special purpose; it was to tell the child, "Here is a story coming," distinguishing what was to follow from everyday truth, and perhaps even giving the child's mind a moment to set itself in readiness.

This "Once upon a time" is a convention of the story read aloud to a child and should not be used for older readers. The first words of a book must be the most carefully chosen of any. For as soon as the curtain rises there is violent competition between the different ingredients, people, place, time, and so on, as to which shall get in first. The

reader should immediately see the scene; you cannot give him characters who flounder around in a vacuum. Give him the scene first, let him know where and when as briefly as possible, and then let your first character walk on, as it were, or catch your reader's eye. Or, let the scene open upon your first character doing something so familiar to the reader that it requires no description.

#### YOUNG LISTENER



'The younger the reader, the simpler must be the scene; the reader builds a picture from his own experience, and the younger he is, the more will lie outside his knowledge, the less within. So, faced at the same time with the need of using only a few words of description in a short book for the very young and with the need to make the picture really clear, you must use either the simplest setting or one which the young listener can fill out with details from his own environment or from other stories he has already heard.'

The child must be able to see clearly and immediately the place you have transported him to. His ability to absorb a foreign background, one alien to his own, is dependent on his age—his mental age, that is, since it will include his own previous reading and knowledge. The younger the child, the more simple the setting. This from *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame:

The mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little house. First with brooms, then with dusters, then with ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash.

Here the unfamiliar immediately becomes cosy and familiar. We have combined action and description, and the

key to the book is put immediately into the reader's hands —animals living like humans.

Another good opening occurs in *The House at Pooh Corner* by A. A. Milne:

One day when Pooh Bear had nothing else to do he thought he would do something, so he went round to Piglet's house to see what Piglet was doing. It was still snowing. . . .

Something, you see, is about to happen. Pooh's curiosity is contagious, and the young reader wants to go along and see too.

That contagious excitement, of something just around the corner, is always successful. There is no better beginning than the first paragraph of *Alice in Wonderland*, which ends with the White Rabbit's exclamation, "Oh dear, oh dear, I shall be too late!"

#### OLDER READER

As your reading public advances in age you have, of course, more scope. Your reader has already heard of other times and other places, has studied about them in school, and you are allowed more choice in your method of description. You can imply and suggest as well as make direct statements; you are allowed longer words, which have more connotation. Scents, colors, and sounds can be used to convey whole groups of associated impressions.

These points in connection with the very young and the older juvenile books are mentioned so you may realize that the setting of the scene is no mere matter of cataloguing the objects which should normally be found there. What you must say will depend from the very outset on the age for which you are writing.)

If the time or place is here and now, then the choice is not difficult. Plunge right in and don't worry. Get into your stride as quickly as possible.

Penrod sat morosely upon the back fence and gazed with envy at Duke, his wistful dog.

There is no time lost here. Boy, dog, and back fence are all so normal to the average young American reader that they need no explanation. The reader is immediately intrigued by the questions propounded: why is Penrod morose? why is Duke wistful? One reads Tarkington further in order to find out.

And the modern touch needs no background or further explanation in

"C'n I have a dog?" asked Freeman. He looked hopefully over his glass of milk at his grandfather, who sat at the head of the table.

As a rule the dialogue opening is better suited to the short story than to the book-length manuscript, since the very construction of the short story precludes too elaborate and unusual a setting.

Sometimes the shorter the introduction, the more intriguing it is. The "Oh, but it was hot!" from the *Turf Cutter's Donkey* by Patricia Lynch gets you immediately into the mood. Then the stage setting follows. Or, you can slip in weather, locality, and action all in the first short paragraph:

The wind had a bite to it. Jan turned the collar of his mackinaw high as he headed westward up the track. Lights had begun to blink in the windows of the settlement huddled beside

the rails, but overhead the cold immensity of the northern twilight still veiled the stars.

#### **STRANGE BACKGROUND**

The more unusual the background and the more out-of-key it is to the surroundings of the modern reader, the more the beginning must be handled with care. In *The Winged Girl of Knossos*, a story of ancient Crete, we used an experience familiar to the modern reader to link him to the unusual background. The heroine was shown diving for sponges, which was active, interesting, and presumably not too far from the readers' own diving experiences. Later, as the story began to develop, we slowly increased the cast of characters, and by taking the two main characters back to the city of Knossos we were able to introduce the unusual setting through their eyes.

#### **OPEN BRISKLY**

When your setting is historical, try to get that fact into the first paragraph. Do not maunder along for a page and a half before the bewildered and by now impatient reader finds out what wood he is wandering in. The old-fashioned book began very leisurely, something like this:

On the human imagination events produce the effects of time. Thus he who has traveled far and seen much is apt to fancy that he has lived long; and the history that most abounds in important incidents soonest assumes the aspect of antiquity. . . .

Now you wouldn't bother to read much beyond that yourself, would you?

**PERIOD BY IMPLICATION**

Many writers try to get the date of the story in actual numerals, in the first or second paragraph. But this seems unnecessary; the date can be led in by costume, atmosphere, choice of period words, or in half a dozen other ways (see the chapter on Local Color).

In the opening of *Heidi*, by Johanna Spyri, the use of the present tense seems to bring the scene nearer to hand:

From the old and pleasantly situated valley of Meyenfeld a footpath winds through green and shady meadows to the foot of the mountains, which on this side look down from their stern and lofty height to the valley below. The land grows gradually wilder and the path ascends. . . .

This is the out-inward method, which leads back from space and distance to the central figure. But it is just as simple to plunge straight in, as in the opening of the *Tangle-Coated Horse* by Ella Young:

A small boy sat under an oak tree in a forest of oaks. Sunburnt of face and of body he was, for his deerskin tunic covered little of him. His blue eyes had a steady look in them, like the eyes of a hawk, and his thick mane of hair was a bright red gold.

So you already have scene, costume, and, by the choice of words for narration, some feeling that the story is to be in the past, as well as a little of the boy's character in his appearance. And in the opening of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*:

It was seven o'clock of a very warm evening in the Seeonee Hills when Father Wolf woke up from his day's rest, scratched

himself, yawned and spread out his paws, one after the other, to get rid of that sleepy feeling in the tips.

Note the use of *that* sleepy feeling, which makes the reader remember that he himself has had the same feeling. You know immediately that the story is to be about animals, and that it will be over the shoulder of the wolf himself.

#### YOU CAN REWRITE LATER

It is seldom possible to get your first chapter just as you want it, straight off the machine. Even very experienced writers have trouble with their opening chapter, still more with their opening paragraph. Once you have your first ten pages written, go back and see if some other viewpoint might not have been better for the opening. And if not, then see if perhaps the first five pages, or anyway the first five paragraphs, can't be blue-penciled out. There is always something bewitched about the opening of a story; the writer seems to need a certain amount of space to get wound up. All right, wind up. Get it out of your system, then cut ruthlessly into the heart of your chapter, and there, almost certainly, you will find what should be your beginning.

#### SET THE STAGE FOR EACH CHAPTER

What is true of the beginning of your story is also true of the beginning of each fresh chapter. Each chapter is like a fresh scene in a play, and as the curtain goes up the reader must be shown at once if it is a continuation of the last chapter or a scene completely different, in background and in time, as well as in camera angle. There is no more bewildered feeling than that occasioned by a chapter which opens on a scene a year or so later than the end of the last one and fails to inform the reader, immediately, of that fact.



## *The Plot Thickens*

IN BUILDING a plot you build backward as well as forward. So far we have shown the forward process. But you can't, when you start on a plot, foresee all that is going to develop in your story, with the result that by Chapter Nine you will find that you need some incident to show that your heroine is afraid of cows or that a man has a wooden leg.

### **PLANTING OR SET-BACK**

It will make the reader suspicious if you just interject these facts, saying, more or less, "By the way, I forgot to tell you that Cinderella is mortally afraid of cows"; or, "that Uncle Bemus has a wooden leg." So earlier, say in Chapter Two, you make Uncle Bemus stump in and out, or have Cin-

derella slip hastily past a gate over which a cow is hanging her head. Well, this, as the name implies, is what we call the set-back; something that occurs to the writer after his story is well along and which he has to go back and set in at an earlier point of the story. You can see how a careful plot will save you much wasted energy. If you write straight through without a preliminary plot and then discover the need for a set-back, you might have to rewrite all of one chapter, and even bits of another, to get it in. With careful plotting this can be avoided.

There are also set-forwards in plotting. When you are working on Chapter Five it may occur to you that the result of Jack's first successful crop will be of interest to other farmers, which will later lead one of them to take some slight part either for or against our hero. Right. So we take another page, label it "Chapter Eight" if we think that's about where we'll want it, and jot down, "Other farmers. Pleased, or jealous?" Then we find we've got to set back these neighbors earlier in the story, that we can't just bring them in out of the blue. Where are we going to bring them in? A market scene when Jack goes to sell his cattle? Or do you know enough about the Grange meeting? As you are plotting you'll begin to realize on what material you'll have to read up. And you can begin this research ahead of time so that when you get around to the actual writing you have begun to digest your new information.

Well, you see now how the plot begins to weave backward and forward and take on substance and depth. And if you use notes you'll be able to get into the habit of saving all those bright ideas which are sure to come to you at the wrong time.

**SCENES**

Plan your story in big scenes. Often one per chapter is sufficient. Sometimes, if it is a battle, a race, or a chase, one scene will hold through several chapters. You can break it by showing different camera angles; you can heighten the suspense by leaving the scene and returning to it in the next chapter; all these are fair. But keep your main sweep of scene. Sometimes an entire book may be written on the strength of three or four big scenes, depending of course on the age of the story; or even one scene, as was *Hurricane* by Nordhoff and Hall.

The big scenes are important, but always, always, keep them relevant to the main plot, and with your ultimate scene, your ultimate goal, in view.

**CHARACTER VERSUS PLOT**

In plotting there are two extremes; your juvenile plot, if it is good, will hit somewhere between the two. There is the plot which is so strong that it takes the characters and twists them to its own end, wrenching them out of their real personalities and flinging them ruthlessly aside into oblivion when the whirlwind has passed. This type of story is met with in pulp fiction, in cheaper detective stories, and in inferior adventure tales. The characters are reduced to dummies. The writer has no interest in what would actually occur between people like Jack and his uncle, no desire to find out the subtle interrelation of one character on another, and so kills the characters for the sake of the plot. Too strong a plot is likely to defeat its own end; the reader loses interest in stuffed dummy characters and doesn't care what does become of them.

A story at the other end of the scale, with all characters and no plot, is quite as bad, and one that the beginner is just as subject to. You must have come across the novel where, for lack of structure (plot), events just go muddling through, characters pop in, full of self-importance, and disappear without reason, and the story seems to end only when the bored printer finds the right number of words and a convenient period. And perhaps what is left over will serve for part of the next story of the series.

#### **COMPLICATION AND SUSPENSE**

In a story based primarily on plot, as in the mystery or adventure story, there must be continual complications to enrich the plot. Sometimes suspense can be accomplished by an interruption in the progress of an incident, as when a complication thrusts into the middle of a main scene. Often one or two chapters can then be taken over by the secondary plot or the incident, leaving the suspense to heighten, so that our reader asks, "Where is our hero all this time, with the water flooding into the cellar and the river rising outside?" Be careful not to make this suspense too long, nor the complication stronger than the main plot, for your reader will lose interest in the real story. As a writer becomes more experienced he will find that this complicated interweaving of plot-strands becomes easier and more engrossing. For this reason an author often progresses from the quite simple plotting of the young book to the more amusing plot structure of the older juvenile, or even adult writing, as his sense of character improves and his style develops to fit one of these classes better than the other.

**PLOT AS MEASURING ROD**

The trick, of course, is always to keep questioning your outline. What is the truly important point in this chapter? What big scene will carry the story, plot, and characters along the road I want them to go—or, by this time, they themselves want to go?

Never, never have your main scenes happen offstage or out of sight of the reader. But be sure which are your main scenes. Your preliminary plot, bare as it is of cluttering detail, should tell you.

**NARRATIVE VERSUS PLOT**

There is a difference between narrative and plot, between a news-story and a fiction-story. If a man digs his way out of entombment in a mine, it may be excellent news, an exciting narrative of dangers, sufferings, and heroic determination, yet still fall short of being a "story" of the kind fiction writers have to construct. This has no relation to whether the report is in fact true; it can be utterly false without making it a story; or conceivably a series of actual happenings might so link together as to form a sound fiction-story.

The practical explanation is that the auditors of storytellers and the readers of books have for generations preferred happenings which follow certain rules. And writers, tribal storytellers (unconsciously or consciously, by trial and error), have sought to discover what these rules are, what makes a series of happenings worth hearing or reading, and therefore financially worth telling or writing.

This book, any book on story-writing, tries to tell you what the main rules seem to be. Obstacles must be over-

come; characters must be delineated, and made to react to each other and to their environment; threads of development must interweave; and, finally, triumph or tragedy, or an equally clear-cut result, rounding off the whole. Any recital of happenings which vitally lacks any of these important elements is not "story."

So never say, "This is a true story, so it must be good." The reverse is more likely to be correct. Fiction-story writing is a highly artificial process.

#### **ACCLAIM**

When, in an adult book, the hero has triumphed in the end, that is usually sufficient. His success rounds off the story. But in juvenile books, particularly those for the younger groups, this must be topped off with acclaim by the grownups—in other words, a clear-cut adult recognition of the juvenile hero's success.

The reason is not far to seek. A child is still mistrustful of his own judgment; he has often been led, misled, into thinking he has done something meritorious, only to find himself condemned by the adults, or at least to find his claim to triumph impatiently ignored or coldly disallowed. So give his hero, with whom he has identified himself to a considerable degree, the satisfaction of having several grown people standing around and saying, in thinly disguised terms, "Why, aren't you wonderfull!"

Well, why not? We ourselves don't hate it and could do, we feel, with more of it. (Prospective "fans" please note!) And don't forget that triumph will still fall flat unless it is preceded by struggle. It is a meal without previous hunger, a drink taken by someone who has not raised a thirst.

**THE THEME**

This is an ingredient of most, if not all, stories, but it is scarcely recognized. Nor is it consciously inserted. The dictionary gives no clue to its meaning in the sense in which it is used by writers, and writers themselves seem to use the term in several different ways and to confuse themselves and other people.

One definition is simple. Theme is no more than a concealed axiom. The kind of moral which Aesop tagged on to the end of a fable but which we hide in the middle of our stories so that our readers won't suspect its presence and say, "What! That old baloney again!"

Almost any folk-saw is good for this purpose. All that glitters is not gold. Who laughs last laughs best. Where there's a will there's a way. Honesty is the best policy. You have read lots of stories with these themes, haven't you? And some writers unashamedly turn them into titles: "All That Glitters, a Thrilling Adventure Story of the Yukon Trail," "The Best Policy, an Inside Write-Up of Harlem Gambling," "Where There's a Will, How Love Came into the Law Firm of Mr. Tut, Tut and Two Tuts."

No, we don't agree that this is all it is. A theme is not blatantly and consciously to be inserted into a story as is stuffing into a goose. Though even so it might improve the flavor if the stuffing were the right kind for the particular bird. We see it as something more akin to a writer's slant; as his or her personal point of view slipping into the story, sometimes without the writer's realizing what is happening. (Take E.B.'s \* *Sojo*, "Busy brain makes idle hands," a good

\* Erick Berry.

instance of close collaboration, E.B. having a liking for busy brains and H.B. for idle hands. Incidentally a most immoral theme for a juvenile story!)

To avoid difficulties over this "writer's slant" idea, let's define it as an axiom unconsciously written in by the writer. And let's get back to the consciously inserted theme.

Perhaps one of the best examples of theme is in *The Jungle Books*. All the way through one hears of the "Law of the Jungle." Fair play, honor, decency, what is done and not done. Mowgli has it driven into him again and again. Yet one cannot feel that the theme grew in Kipling's mind before he wrote his stories. As the characters evolved, as he saw their behavior becoming more and more coherent and real, so he got the idea of an underlying motivation, and even wrote the Law of the Jungle jingles:

Now these are the Laws of the Jungle,  
and many and mighty are they;  
But the head and the hoof of the Law  
and the haunch and the hump is  
—Obey!

And not a bad one for a child's book either.



## *So They Won't Talk, Huh? ~~X~~*

DIALOGUE gives many beginners more trouble than any other part of writing. Even the experienced writer, when overtired, may find that his knack with conversation is the first to fail him. His characters will go verbose and dull, or, when checked and brought back to the point and asked to be bright, will stand mute of malice in the witness stand. And though you may not believe it, the writer who suffers most in this situation is the one whom we all envy; he, or more usually she, who has a natural gift for bright and snappy repartee and has never been forced to analyze the principles he or she has been using unconsciously.

But we all suffer, and most especially those of us who write juveniles. We can't do without dialogue in our books, but we have good reason to know that children are im-

patient of wordy adults, and we can visualize some tough little guy of twelve hurling aside our painfully built up story with the damning "Aw gee! It ain't nothin' but talk!"

Good dialogue cannot be produced by mixing a few rules with a little ink and stirring with a pen; such synthetic stuff looks and sounds *ersatz*. But an idea of the principles which underlie sound storybook conversation will enable you to keep your characters on the right track and to bring them back when they stray.

#### "REAL" DOES NOT SOUND REALISTIC

No story in the juvenile lists is a mirror of real life, and the younger the age group for which it is intended the less photographic can it be.

If you think you can use real talk, with slight adaptation, listen carefully to your own conversations in the course of any one day and, if you have the opportunity, jot down any bits which on consideration sound less inane than others. Or take the duologue you overheard on the bus:

"Going to the movies tonight?"

"No, I guess not."

"Why not? John Gabriel in *Idiot's Idol* is . . ."

"Who cares? Anyway he's lousy."

"No he isn't. Anyway it's the most truthful delineation of a problem which . . ."

"You've been reading a book!"

"Well, that's what the movie critic in *The New Yorker* says and he ought to . . ."

At this point you don't bother to listen any more and turn to your evening paper.

It isn't merely the dullness of reality which makes it unsuited to your book. Set yourself down at table with the

wits as they toy with ingenious verbal twists, ply paradoxes, and steal each other's epigrams. You still couldn't use the stuff, however carefully you adapted it. The objection is not simply the obvious one that it would not fit your plot. There is a more basic reason—that in an unreal, but real-seeming, fiction book, a chunk of the real will seem by contrast unreal.

#### DIALOGUE MUST ADVANCE THE STORY

It can do this either by demonstrating and developing the traits with which we intend to endow our characters or by entangling or disentangling the threads of our plot. Preferably, and this is usually possible, dialogue should do both.

If we discover that our bright and ingenious half-page of talk has not taken the reader any further forward on either of these lines, then there's only one thing to do about it. Put a heavy blue line right through it and note in the margin "del. all." Then find where we went off the track and start again.

#### DIALOGUE MUST BE IN CHARACTER

Dialogue must sound as though the characters really spoke and not as though the writer put his own words into their mouths. The words, the phrases, whether slangy or pedantic, whether brief or verbose, whether restrained or excited, must fit the person talking. They must "feel" right. And it is still more important that the thoughts behind the words should be in character. Gestures and any description of tones of voice or other accompanying comment by the writer must also tie in.

Great value attaches to dialogue being in character. The reader of your book, whatever age or sex, has for years, with-

out realizing it, weighed and judged people by what they say and how they say it. A dog reacts to another dog's bark or growl; it is as primitive as that. So, owing to the importance of the spoken word as compared with description, we need to take extra pains over it; and extra pains, too, in making the whole tie-up consistent. We may have gone to a great deal of trouble with a gesture here, and action there, and a few words of description, to round out an interesting character part. But should the spoken words of the character seem to belie the part we have built up for him, then our effort will have been expended in vain. An inconsistent character is at the best confusing, and at the worst utterly unreal.

As instances of how forcefully even an isolated sentence or two of speech may imply the nature of the speaker, let us take the following:

"What, sir, fill these empty heads, sir, with dangerous thoughts of liberty?" His face grew even redder.

In the above phrase "noddle" could be substituted for "head" if the character fits into a period story, and his color could be made to change from a "light claret to a deep port," thus picturing the pompous old conservative of any age. Or:

"Liberty, my dear fellow, is purely a negative term; primarily freedom from the slave's duty to a master. This liberty they know. To teach them any further liberty is unjustifiably to preach their release from the obligation incumbent upon each member of a social order." His thin lips set in mulish obstinacy.

Another character you see, on a similar point. Note how we have not had to say that the character spoke. We just let

him speak. It's obvious anyway that he is speaking, the quotes show that. Or again:

"Why do they talk of freedom? As well talk of the water, of the air which all men enjoy." The Alkali's deep, wrinkled eyes showed puzzled beneath his turban. "Unless, in truth, they demand the freedom which is no freedom, freedom to deny liberty to others, freedom to oppress."

You see it's no good translating just the language. You've got to translate the thought as well. You must give your character the mental processes of his race, of his period in time, of his personality. This is the whole trick, or almost the whole, of bringing him alive.

#### DIALOGUE AS INTRODUCTION

This is useful because each character, in speaking, is building a picture of himself or herself in the mind of the reader, while the story also goes along.

He seated himself with care, preserving the immaculate crease in his trousers, laid pale gloves beside his pale homberg. "Tea, dear Miss Archibald? How charming! But no sugar ple . . . ase, I beg of you."

And:

The bugles on her bonnet quivered. With evident relief she accepted a chair and rested the ancient feet inside the ancient misshapen shoes. "I do say as 'ow a nice 'ot cup of tea, thankin' you kindly, miss, is . . ."

And:

"Tea ma? But gee that's a sissy drink." Momentarily he

sprawled on the arm of a chair. "Gotta bottle of coke in the ice-box?"

And:

The Queen's small hands received the bowl of translucent alabaster. She sipped, delicately, as a bird might drink at one of the palace fountains; and glanced up in gratitude to her handmaid. "No drink so sweet as the juices of fruit grown in our garden of the City of the Horizon." She handed back the bowl. "No draught so bitter as the Pharaoh's death."

The incident taken is the unexciting one of a character taking a drink. But the different versions serve to make the point that, even in so simple an act, characters can build themselves up with word and action. No two people do even the simplest thing in quite the same way.

This is a grand parlor game between two writers. And you can practice it by yourself in the subway or on a bus—or even at a boring dinner table.

#### DIRECT, COLORED INDIRECT, AND PURE INDIRECT SPEECH

These have their special uses and are worth distinguishing one from the other. This helps to get your effect more surely.

Direct speech is recognizable, quite simply, by its quotation marks:

"Guess I'll be getting on my way." John tried to make it sound casual.

The old man with the drooping stained mustache looked up, sad-eyed as a hound. "You're wrong, son. You ain't aimin' to git nowheres. A load of shot in this yere gun don't weigh much, but the same in a feller's belly kinda founders the feller."

Colored indirect speech is similar, but put into indirect speech. It retains the speaker's phraseology as far as possible.

John guessed he'd be getting on his way and tried to make the announcement sound casual.

The old man with the drooping stained mustache looked up, sad-eyed as a hound. John was wrong, he warn't aimin' to git nowheres, the old man allowed. And hinted that the load of shot in his ancient gun might not weigh much, but the same in a young feller's belly might be enough to founder him.

Straight indirect may follow closely the lines of colored indirect, but changes the colored "warn't" for "was not," "git" for "get," "nowheres" for "anywhere." Or it may report only the effect of what was said, not the words themselves:

John said he was going, trying to make it sound casual. The old man . . . threatened to put a load of shot in him.

At the end of a story for juveniles, when the hero so often gets his acclaim, the use of direct speech adds to the importance of this need of praise. Indirect speech is clearly unsatisfying:

The old trapper said that Daniel Boone himself could not have done better, and that he was proud of the boy.

This is much more forcible in direct speech.

"By golly! Ol' Dan'l Boone hisself couldn't a shot quicker, ner straighter. I'm proud o' ye, lad!"

#### CONDENSING BY MEANS OF REPORT

Extreme indirect speech is a handy trick, and sometimes indispensable. Take the following instances and decide which one you would prefer if you were the reader:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am greatly honored by being called upon to speak here tonight before so distinguished an audience. It is an honor which I scarcely deserve. An honor which was completely unexpected. An honor in fact unsought; but let me not say unappreciated. . . ."

Or in the condensed indirect:

For twenty-two minutes and forty-seven seconds he drank three glasses of water and said he was honored. When he stopped to drink again they all clapped for fear maybe he'd got still more coming.

Here's another example in which condensation by report is necessary:

He said it was a private pool, and nobody had a right to go swimming in it. He said his piece four times, stooped to fasten his shoe lace, then repeated it six times more, making a longer speech of it each time. Sue May wished the water weren't so icy, or that she had gone back for a bathing suit after all.

It is obvious that the reader wouldn't stand for the same dull speech repeated ten times. Yet the effect is needed in order to build up the picture of Sue May shivering away in the icy water, unable to come out as long as the man stands there talking.

#### PART IN DIRECT SPEECH, PART IN CONDENSED

This method combines the force of direct speech and the brevity of reporting. But there is a right and a wrong way. Here's the wrong way first:

He refused to sign.

Jonathan smiled and said, "I quite agree with you. Why should you? Nobody can make you." And smilingly took out his fountain pen and shook the ink down to the nib.

In this example we've condensed the wrong part. Let's try again, reversing the process:

"I'll not sign, durn 'ee," he bellowed, "and there's nobody this side of the Rocky Mountains can make me! Not you, not Martha, not even the President can make me sign. Nobody, I tell 'ee!"

Jonathan took out his pen, smiled, and shook the ink down to the nib.

Of course, if we're not sacrificing something in plot or character development and want to save space or flatten our effects, we can condense the whole to:

Jonathan had to wait while Caleb went through his usual outburst about not signing.

Let's take two more examples and then try to formulate the rules:

"Good-by, Hans. Good-by, Mary. Good-by, George. I'll send you my address. Well, so-long. See you again some day." Outside the door he seemed to remember something, and called them a lousy bunch of skunks.

Condensing this differently, we get:

He made his good-bys. Just outside the door he paused, seemed to remember something. "By the way, I don't think I've ever told you that you're the lousiest bunch of skunks in three counties."

The main rule of condensation is, naturally, to condense the unimportant. Space is saved without loss, and the effect of what is important is enhanced. Most of the time we seem to do this instinctively, but on occasion we have to ask ourselves whether to sacrifice a telling phrase which sheds a neat light on character, or leave in what seems to be false

emphasis. In most such instances we should sacrifice what we think is the telling phrase, because it probably isn't as smart as we think. In general, sacrifice what is attractive in manner to what is important in matter; let the emphasis lie on what gets on with the story, not on nice bits of writing. When you revise the story, it is easier to put pep into dull writing than to tighten up the structure of the story.

#### **HE SAID, SHE SAID**

These are usually unnecessary. The verb "to say" is too general to be very effective and too colorless. In other words it is of too great extension and too little intension. Use, but with discretion of course, the more specialized verbs such as yelled, howled, screamed, bellowed, grunted, muttered, whispered, and so on. People sometimes use verbs which don't strictly apply, such as "smirked, hiccoughed":

"I'm glad you like it," he smirked.

A verb we dislike considerably, and find that other readers do too, is "cry." It was so overworked at one time and was used far outside its dictionary definition:

"Dear John," she cried, "I'm so happy!"

It goes with the overuse of the exclamation mark:

"It's going to rain!" he cried.

A remark which surely wasn't sufficiently exciting to be reported in this emotional manner.

It is worth remembering that we have quotation marks to indicate "said," a question mark to indicate "asked," and an exclamation point to indicate "exclaimed!" By utilizing the reader's intelligence we can use dots or dashes to show other effects:

"I'm going to—"

"—Chicago," [John interrupted.] "I know already."

The words "John interrupted" are really superfluous.

"I haven't slept . . . since . . . since . . ." his voice trailed away as his head sank lower and lower.

Or again:

"By——!" Martha closed her ears on his oath; his favorite oath "by Gillywhimkins!"

We daren't go into the mechanics of punctuation any further. We're not too hot ourselves, and we're always in trouble with editors who belong to another and probably superior school of thought. No two editors agree, either. And we don't agree between ourselves. All we're trying to illustrate is the many and varied ways of conveying a character's spoken words.

Here are some miscellaneous examples of conversation, monologue, duologue, and dialogue, which illustrate certain points:

Nathaniel got to his feet. "Good. Then it's settled." He put his hand on the doorknob.

And:

Grandfather had gathered his breath for a roar when Oliver found his voice. "No." It was a flat statement.

No "said," "protested," "remarked," or "objected" are used. And they aren't missed. If you don't feel that the type of story you are constructing can dispense with verbs, there are still any number of substitutes for the tedious "said" or the distasteful "cried."

"I gotta right, ain't I?" he whined.

Or:

"Damme, sir! Damme!" he exploded. "When I was your age. . . ."

The word "said" still has its uses, despite anything which we have "said" in previous paragraphs. It is colorless, unemphatic, and valuable where one wants to be colorless and unemphatic. It conveniently replaces "written" where that word tends to be overused:

Nothing which we say in this book should be taken to imply that you can write stories by rote or manufacture them by rules, however elaborate these may be. A writer can only state what he knows, say what he feels. . . .

Or:

What was said by long-moldered lips will dictate the actions of yet unborn limbs.

In neither of these examples could more colorful verbs of speech be utilized.

#### THE STOOGE

This is as useful in story dialogue as in stage dialogue. Watson to Sherlock Holmes, Alice to Humpty Dumpty and the Caterpillar, always ask just the right questions and make the appreciative remarks. It often happens that one character will, without the full consent of the author, turn out to be a stooge all the way through the story; the patient friend of the hero is likely to take on that unappreciated role. But no character, not even the hero, should be so selfish as not to feed back lines occasionally in return:

"And so these three little sisters—they were learning to draw, you know. . . ."

"What did they draw? asked Alice.

"Treacle," said the Dormouse.

And so on throughout the entire tea party scene.

#### WHEN YOU HAVE MORE THAN TWO CHARACTERS CONVERSING

The rule for duologue applies equally to dialogue. On paper three or four people cannot interrupt each other to the point of drowning out each other's voices, as they can, unfortunately, in real life. So choose the character you wish to feature, play him up; the others will feed him lines, or applaud him verbally, or merely interrupt with gestures that express their varying emotions. Should you wish to swing the attention to another character, as on entering a scene, do it, as always, with a purpose.

#### PATTERN ON THE PAGE

This may seem simply a matter for the editor. But a solid page of description is out of place in a juvenile. Short lines and brief paragraphs betokening swift action will catch the eye of a boy reader. Plenty of quotes and short paragraphs will lead a girl reader to think that she will find nice chunks of conversation. And a general rule for the writer of juveniles is that the appearance of the printed pages should show a reasonable balance and alternation between description, action, and talk.

#### THE EMPHATIC BREAK

This, in a sentence of direct speech, is a trick of the trade which we cannot afford to neglect.

"I'm dead sure we should!" Then weakly, "Er . . . oughtn't we?"

The break gives the hesitating pause while the speaker loses confidence and appeals for reassurance.

Arrange your direct speech, your author's comment on the speech, or the elucidatory or commentary action, with a definite purpose:

She emptied the small change from her purse on to the bare table; added a five-dollar bill. "And here's your latchkey. I'm through!"

The speech comes last because the action builds up to it. The sentence "And here's your latchkey" is used instead of reporting that the girl added the key to the money on the table, because the words "I'm through!" would be a little too short to register properly in the mind of the reader. Readers don't study our books to extract the last least finest shade of meaning. They read to fill in time.

Nor would it be effective to put the return of the latchkey into action and then pad the farewell into a longer speech such as:

"I'm through with you, you cheap grinning ape! I'm through with you now and forever! D'you hear?"

The more significant "And here's your latchkey," combined with the curt "I'm through!" has more punch.

Here are some more examples of the ways in which a spoken sentence may be divided:

"I am not," she said distinctly, "going."

When you divide speech, do it consciously, with your pur-

pose clear in your mind. You could divide the above sentence into:

"I," she said distinctly, "am not going."

The first break is equivalent to the old-fashioned italicized "I am *not* going." The second to "*I* am not going." The first stresses the determination not to go. The second that, whoever else is going, she is not.

Here are two more examples of the break used in lieu of italics for emphasis. Italics are definitely "out."

"I don't think," she asserted, "I know."

This is equivalent to:

"I don't *think*, I *know*," she asserted.

By the way, for the next few years you may have editor trouble over reported speech. Though italics are *démodeé* and another means of emphasis or stress is needed, there is no general agreement over what alternative is permissible. The old rule was that direct speech was in quotes and always called for a fresh paragraph. The break which we've mentioned above was almost unknown. And it was *de rigueur* to add the "he said, she said" after every quotes-off. Adult literature breaks new ground yearly in technique; the juvenile market remains more conservative.

On the subject of the break we have one word of warning. Of course, it's "Don't," and the particular Don't is—don't get into fixed habits with the break. Don't break your sentences in the same way time after time until it becomes a mannerism. A number of writers whom we thoroughly respect have done so and allowed their subconscious sense of

rhythm to lead them into developing a wearisome jingle. We take an example so it shall not seem too invidious:

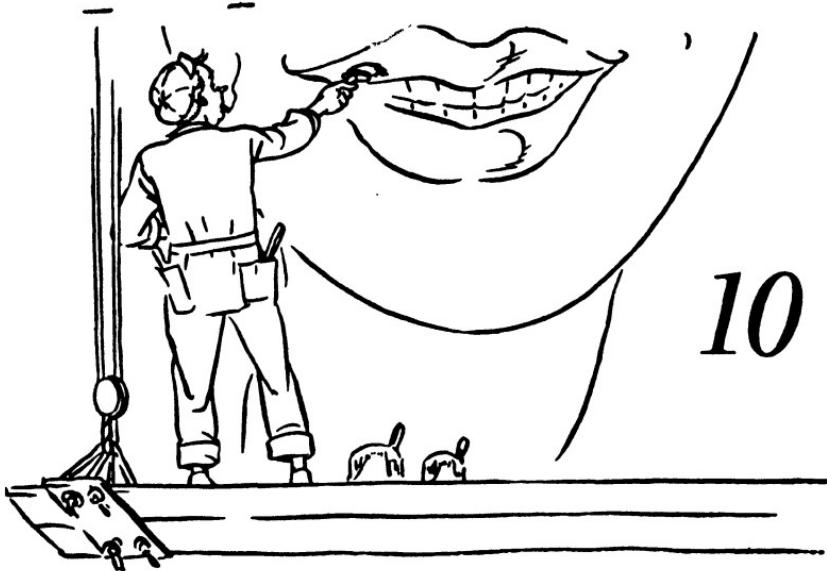
"Please!" she protested, "it's late."

"Don't," he begged, "forget that I've come all the way from Flushing."

"Really," she sneered, "you must tell me about your travels some other time."

"Perhaps," he prophesied, "I will."

The best preventive is a good, and therefore evil-seeming, collaborator.



## *Local Color and Atmosphere*

LOCAL color is the part of your story which is neither character, speech, nor action. Put another way, it is the circumstances in which the characters live and in which the action takes place. These comprise both Time and Place. Call it description if you will. There can be no tight definition, as it merges into speech, where a character's choice of words gives place and period; into action, when a man builds a Pyramid or gains a motorboat speed record; into character, where the picture you give is limited to what he could be in that country and that period, and so in turn reflects the country and the period.

Local color in its simplest form is straightforward descrip-

tion. Here is an example taken from *Honey of the Nile*, a girl's story of ancient Egypt by E.B.:

Kem squeezed his way between a charcoal-laden donkey and the purchaser of two flapping, squawking ducks, bestrode a roll of clean, woven palm-leaf mats, and tucking his matting-wrapped bundle tighter beneath his arm, resisted the persuasions of a seller of well-carved throwing sticks, which, so claimed the seller, would, if cast by a blind man, yet find their mark. Swarthy countrymen squatting bare-bodied in the blazing sun. The reek of a trodden onion. Two curly-bearded Assyrians, smelling of spice, discussing, with gestures of heavy-braceleted arms, the price of a basket of grain. A single, slight-waisted Keftiu with light dancing stride, a deep-sea sailor, by his weatherbeaten face and salt cracked hands. Pale Thebans slinking through, guarding their precious, new-gauffered linen from pollution. A sudden shout, and the thud of a heavy whip, a nobleman's overseer driving home a batch of newly purchased slaves.

In nothing so much as in description do we writers divide into two classes, those who "simply love to write," and those who have to struggle to set down their ideas. We are workers in the same medium, but we are as differently endowed as accountants and mathematicians, who both work with the same raw material, figures. Each needs a warning.

The one who loves writing, often a woman, licks her lips in anticipation and drifts happily off into an orgy of description; she touches on every item of dress, sniffs at each flower, turns humdrum weather into fantasy, and in general gives herself and some readers a grand escape from their present troubles. But she tends to go lush, to overdramatize what many readers cannot help realizing is the insignificant, not

merely in fact, but in the development of the story. And she lets action, character, and plot development go hang.

The other, the tortured-soul type of writer, when up against the necessity for a bit of description, bites his nails, puts through several urgent telephone calls, oils his typewriter, puts in a new ribbon, fills pens, and sharpens pencils. Finally he achieves a few short lines, which still leave his characters standing in an all but timeless void, and comforts himself with "You've got to allow the reader some intelligence, not tell him everything.") If you should be tempted along these lines, remember that the reader may justifiably insist that the writer, who is being paid, shall do the hard work which makes the book easy reading.

#### UNINSPIRED CATALOGUE

This method of description was characteristically Victorian. In a conscientious manner, unrelieved by incident or speech, a leisurely inventory was recorded. Here is a mild example from Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Men*:

The house seemed swarming with boys who were beguiling the rainy twilight with all sorts of amusements. There were boys everywhere, "upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber," apparently, for various open doors showed pleasant groups of big boys, little boys, and middle-sized boys, in all stages of evening relaxation, not to say effervescence. Two large rooms on the right were evidently schoolrooms, for desks, maps, blackboards, and books were scattered about. An open fire burned on the hearth, and several indolent lads lay on their backs before it. . . .

(All right, lady, we got you—*boys*.)

The autocratic authors of that day would sometimes work

unrelentingly through large patches of time and space before they pinned down the scene and the character, and would repeat almost the same full process as each character made his appearance. These days it would cause a readers' strike, so please don't try it.

#### DESCRIPTION CARRYING ACTION

This is the best kind of description to use in a boys' book. Here is a short example:

Balancing the bundle of leopard skins and the now depleted sack of foodstuffs, he leaped and dropped down the narrow, boulder-choked pass.

The verbs of action are what attract the boy reader. Let's change to more static verbs to show this point:

He had a bundle of leopard skins and a sack of foodstuffs, now depleted. The pass down which he went was narrow and choked with boulders.

Here is a description from a girls' book, only a little more static than good boys' stuff. Girls definitely like to have more attention paid to description and don't resent having action slowed by it to a reasonable extent:

Between them, they found a low adobe house, whitewashed, with long strings of chili peppers hanging from the red tiled roof and a feathery green tree shading the small patio. It was less pretentious than the houses of the *ricos* nearer the Plaza, and Doña Maria Jimenez showed them two yeso-washed rooms, with floors of pounded earth on which they could lay their grass-stuffed mattresses, and, through Charley as interpreter, explained how Sukey could build a cook fire in the thrifty Mexican fashion.

There's quite a lot of description fed in here, while the action of the story moves on uninterrupted. That is one of the most important points to observe. The writer with a sure touch is like an experienced traveler who packs just what is necessary; not like the man who encumbers himself with all kinds of junk because he's too lazy to think. Which brings us to the principle, obvious enough, but often forgotten, that *description must be selective*, not comprehensive. It must record the salient points and let go of the inessential. The whole art of writing is selective, not verbatim reporting.

This is not an artificial convention; far from it. In real life, when we enter a room, we are not immediately aware of all its furnishings and all the people in it. The eye may be caught by something which moves, a bright color, and a general impression of a roomful of people. Then action starts; perhaps the host or the hostess comes up to welcome us; and we are caught up by conversation before we have noticed more than three people. Only later do further details come to our notice.

In writing we do well to follow the same line. Bring out the striking or the necessary first, get things moving, then bit by bit drop in any further detail which you think will help. You'll be surprised, once you get into the swing of it, how much you can slip in by implication. Don't, for instance, stop to say:

The sun was hot and he was perspiring.

Use instead a phrase which allows the reader to guess this.

He lifted his sun helmet a cautious inch and mopped the back of his neck.

**OVER THE SHOULDER DESCRIPTION**

This has the advantage of building up, to a lesser or greater extent according to its subjectiveness, the character of the person over whose shoulder it is told. No two people see the same scene or occurrence in the same way, and therefore how they see it throws a reflected light upon them. Here's an example in which this method is used lightly but effectively:

The kitchen blazed with sunlight. Outside a robin sat on a budding apple-tree bough and above the clamor of the yard shouted about spring. Last week Handy Post had taken down the double windows on this side of the house. Grandfather always had that done as early as he could, so he could issue verbal orders from the dining room. Miss Grinnel, removing her bonnet in the entry, frowned a little at the noise, but Persis never noticed it, or if she did, found it exciting, stimulating. It meant so much, it meant that men were fixing the launching cradle under the brig; that timbers were being wrought for the frame of the new ship where the propeller had been; but best of all the drumming noise came from a dozen men hard at work, planking up the *David Crockett*. Hammering too sounded from across the river, and right up from Mystic bridge. Men who'd worked conscientiously through the ice and storms of winter, through the slush of the thaws, would now be singing as they pounded. More than the robin were grateful it was spring.

This example could not have been over the shoulder of a soured embittered character. It implies kindliness of outlook, youthful exuberance of spirit at the coming of spring, intimate knowledge of Grandfather and his ways, a feeling for the men down in the yard, and a knowledge of and in-

terest in shipbuilding. But it would be deadly dull to inform the reader of this in plain flat statements.

Here are some examples which show why Kipling is such a master of description by implication.

"Lord! What a worn, handsmooth trade it is!"

The term "handsmooth" does not merely avoid the danger of "worn" being taken by a reader to mean worn out or dying, but emphasizes the idea of its being stained, oiled, and polished by innumerable hands.

He yerked at Hugh with his scabbard.

An uncommon word like "yerk" needs to be used with discretion, so that it shall not by its strangeness carry too much weight.

There was the moonlight fretty on the floor.

"Fretty" is also uncommon. But surely more exact for the pattern cast by leaded windows with lozenge panes than "checkerboard pattern" or even "chequer-wise," both of which imply alternating black and white and squareness of pattern.

. . . lifting a hand, and the sunlight jinked on his glass brace-light.

Kipling probably took the word *jink* from the swift turn of a boar when pursued by "pig-stickers" in India. I know of no other root. Somehow it fits, perhaps by association with the rhyming "clink."

These examples also serve to show that, contrary to the belief of many juvenile writers, librarians, and teachers, the vocabulary used in books for boys and girls need not be

restricted to words of everyday use. Here's some more Kipling for juveniles:

The East winds blow like skinning knives.

We could say "cuttingly," but the mention of skinning knives, as though they were a natural and obvious simile, suggests to the reader a primitive setting in which slaughtering and flaying were not specialized trades, but were done by the hunter or housewife. The word "keen," i.e., knife-sharp, would be good had it not lost its association with cutting edges. The skinning knife set the period in the above quotation. So does a single word in each of the following:

"I have never seen woman fit to strew rushes before my Lady Ælueva. . . ."

Not only does this imply a period before the days of rugs or good planking, but it is also very emphatic. The rushes on the floor kept the feet warm, collected filth from boots, scraps from the table, fleas from the dogs. Removing old rushes and strewing new was a very lowly and to modern senses distasteful task, not far removed from "mucking-out" a stable with the bare hands.

. . . he said, fretting with his great war gloves.

"War" gloves at once takes us back to a period when men went fully armed or partly armed, but always armed. Less hackneyed than emphasis on the man's sword. The word "fretting" is also valuable. It is a term used of a horse champing, playing, or fidgeting with his bit. It fits the man who is shown elsewhere as an impatient tough little Norman knight forever on horseback. "Fidgeting" instead of "fretting" would be too sissy to fit him.

Perhaps it takes a man who has written much verse to

develop an instinctive choice of the right word; right in cadence, right in meaning, and right in implication or effect. Kipling's most valuable lesson to us is not to shy away from a term just because it is unusual or unusual in the context in which we want to use it. Here is a very common word used in a very uncommon manner:

The echoes flapped all along the flat meadow.

Try to find a substitute for "flapped" which will give as good an effect.

Here's a description through the eyes of a Roman soldier marching up over the bare moors to garrison duty on the North Wall of England:

. . . where the shadows of the clouds play like cavalry charging—the road goes on and on, and the wind sings through your helmet plume.

And again, using a simile which would readily occur to a man accustomed to the social life centering around the *thermae*, the Turkish baths of the Romans:

. . . the day was hot as a bath.

#### PERSONALIZATION OF DESCRIPTIVE SETTING

This is an effective trick but should be used with discretion, particularly as it is often used unconsciously. The essence of this effect is that the writer thinks of the environment almost as though it were an animate character. The struggler-after-words won't overdo this animation of the inanimate, but the writer who writes by instinct and loves writing may be in danger of going lush.

The tropical forest did not rest in the midday heat: rather it crouched, listened, and tensed to spring.

The example is fictitious, but it is no exaggeration of the lush style, and we're a shade anxious lest it has already appeared in several books and we get into trouble. No doubt it is how a forest might appear to a hypersensitive observer, and writers tend to be hypersensitive. To the more normal reader, however, particularly the realistic boy and girl, such straining after effect will seem hysterical. To the nail-biting, foot-shuffling writer too, it will seem an unfair method of trying for a suspense which should be conveyed more honestly. Can a forest crouch? It certainly can't listen without ears, or tense to spring without nerves or muscle.

The Omniscient Author who describes a scene in his own words and not in those of a character cannot ethically demand that his reader accept such a perversion of nature. The author is allowed one generous lie: The assertion or implication that his story is true. This is fair, except in travel books, because no one is deceived. But after allowing the writer this sweeping liberty, the reader demands that the laws of nature, whether physical or psychical, be complied with to the best of the writer's ability. (Unless of course, the writer has served warning by the whole character of his book that it is a fantasy.) The reader is reasonably convinced that water does not run uphill and that trees, even of a tropical forest, do not lurk to spring upon an unsuspecting victim. He requires of us that we respect this reasonable prejudice of his.

This restriction to the realms of the reasonable still leaves the writer with plenty of scope in description. Sunshiny weather may be bland and innocuous to the point of boredom; or the same weather may, through a change in barometric pressure, give a distinct impression of foreboding,

perhaps because in our experience and that of our ancestors the change in air pressure often has heralded a storm. The same sun rays which make sunbathers relax upon the beaches may kill a prospector in Death Valley or bring torture and blindness to a camel driver in Arabia. In the weather we can find enough violence, gentleness, cruelty, kindness, patience, irritability, reliability, fickleness, either in fact or in seeming, to suffice us in our descriptions.

Weather is mentioned above as actively affecting the characters; it may also serve as background to convey a mood. Rain or sunshine may be used to suggest despair or hope, misery or happiness; and more forcefully, if still banally, to give contrast to a character's mood—whistling through the rain or staring gloomily down on the gleaming golden wheat fields.

The simplest personalization of background is as a friend or as an enemy. A swollen river may befriend the hero and defeat the villain, or vice versa. The heavy snowfall makes or breaks the heroine's party. But the reader will let you go far beyond this if you are tactful. Perhaps we've still got more animism in our beliefs than we realize, and feel, without allowing ourselves to admit it in other than poetic language, that inanimate matter actively intervenes in our lives and influences us. It slips out in such phrases as "the sea was his mistress," "nature is a hard taskmaster," "the treacherous quicksands," "mother nature," "wedded to his task," "frowning cliffs," "smiling plains," "chuckling brook."

If we convey the personalization of the inanimate by delicate suggestion and don't affront the reader by exaggeration, as in the example of a forest tensing to spring, we can get an

added richness. There's still good story-stuff in the favorite old Greek theme of man shaking a puny fist at the gods and getting a kick in the pants.

### CHECK YOUR FACTS

Popular fallacies seem to slip into description and background material more than into any other part of a book. So when you write a story in a setting outside your personal experience, guard against accepting popular beliefs without verification. Here are a few, the first two of which have spoiled excellent stories by first-class writers:

Africa, the Dark Continent—far from being unexplored and mysterious, every yard has been mapped, and every individual pays tax.

Chinatown, the sinister—the police of many countries are unanimous in agreeing that the Chinese quarter of any big town is remarkably peaceful, and that in lack of juvenile delinquencies it is top of the list.

Lands of eternal ice—is the popular impression of countries beyond the Arctic or Antarctic Circles, although in their brief summers the thermometer may rise above the figure in our own homes and flowers blossom and berries ripen almost overnight.

Sands of the desert—much of the desert is rocky, not sandy. Incidentally, deserts can be exceedingly cold, and ice may form on your waterbottle in the Sahara at night.

The dangerous bull—is used in bullfighting in preference to the cow simply because he's less dangerous.

Stung by a bumblebee—bumblebees and the impressive looking drones don't sting. They leave that to the small inoffensive looking workers.

The English all drop their "h's," the Americans all speak through their noses; a bulldog is more dangerous than a terrier; Alsatians and collies are vicious—but you can think up dozens of others for yourself.

There is only one way to avoid such errors altogether, and that is to write only of what you have seen, heard, smelled, or otherwise experienced. Where you need to go beyond your own positive knowledge, use solid works of reference; the duller they are, the more accurate they are likely to be.

✓ Juveniles demand greater accuracy than do adults, although the opposite view is generally held. Not only must your book pass the learned scrutiny of librarians and teachers in their official capacity, when they are reading critically and not for pleasure, but boys, and possibly to a lesser extent girls, ask more than just to be amused. Perhaps they want to trust you.

The younger reader has good cause to doubt many of the accepted beliefs which have been thrust upon him by his elders. At the high-school age he has embarked on the depressing task of taking the world apart to see how it works, what is really true, and what are the fundamental principles of the whole universe. He may be developing what he likes to think of as "my philosophy of life." Beneath this surface, he is very earnestly searching for ultimate truths. It is natural that at this stage he should be roused to bitter and, as an adult would think, excessive antagonism by a writer who tries to put something over on him, something that does not ring true. But give him characters and background which seem to him to be real, and he will be a lenient judge of shortcomings in technique.

**OUT-INWARD OR IN-OUTWARD**

Which of the two methods should we use? Should we start with the continent, narrow the scene down through country, state, county, to village, house, and room? Or should we work—like a postal address—the opposite way? Here's an example of the out-inward:

The African night had closed down over the mud-walled city of Kornu, and all good citizens should long since have retired within the privacy of their compounds. Yet, at the small mosque beside the dye-pits, the private chapel of the chief dyer, a dozen men waited tensely.

Out-inward is the older method perhaps, and certainly the more general. It is used in setting time as well as place. It can have a ponderous effect, as though the reader were casting his mind across the centuries, his eye over the continents, until at last a mere human or group of humans squirming there below chanced to catch his attention.

In view of the modern tendency to start stories and scenes with action or at least human interest, one would expect the description to start with, say, the hero, and work outward to his place in time and space. Perhaps this tendency will develop, but at present it is hard to find examples. They would go somewhat like this:

Jerry was hot. The chair on which he sat was hot. The veranda creaked as its dried-out timbers still shrunk and twisted. The grass-thatched village below wavered in the mirage; all Africa seemed to writhe beneath the oppressive violence of the sun. It was difficult to believe that there must still be unmelted ice somewhere around the polar regions.

Probably one reason why the in-outward method is not

used more frequently is the difficulty in getting back again after having got out—to return, without too harsh a jump, from the polar regions to the sweating boy in Africa. It can be done, of course:

A hundred square yards of icecap was about all Jerry could picture. And it was more like superheated glass than real ice and kept melting away faster than the imagination could build it up. Jerry sighed, closed his eyes, and prepared himself to endure. The evening breeze would rise in another hour.

#### LOCAL COLOR

Through phrases, similes, allusions, as well as in actual description, feed in the local color.

Pausing only to reach down lunch baskets, pails, and parcels, and strainingly attempting to appear not to hurry till they were outside the door, the twenty-two boys, twenty-seven girls, and one bouncing dog shot down the school steps. Yelling with the fervor of Piquot Indians from upriver, they broke apart like a wave on the blunt bows of an East Indiaman, and splashed off to all points of the compass.

Here the simile carries along the atmosphere as well as the action. In another example we have an entirely different type of simile:

Breathless and gasping she wriggled through to the comparative calm of the postern gate. Nowhere could she find a suitable envoy. She looked back upon the struggling, screaming mob. As well seek an eel in Nile mud as a messenger in this melee. Well, she would go herself, and the confusion would serve as an excuse for not being bothered with old Weret. A brief backwash of the human tide pressed outward through the gate. Hanofre, inserting herself between a sweating, leather-aproned glass

worker and an ill-smelling bearer of onions, while a donkey nose nuzzled her shoulder, found herself squeezed breathless, then shot out into the roadway like water over a dam. She gasped, smoothed down her crumpled skirt, straightened her collar of fresh flowers. That settled it. She gave a little skip and turned west, toward the river.

And in John Bennett's *Master Skylark* the choice of similes, and even the adverbs, help to set the stage. The period is that of Shakespeare.

. . . set the town buzzing like a swarm.

. . . a hum that grew by littles.

. . . low stone wall lined with straddling boys like strawberries upon a spear of grass.

. . . the long file [of soldiers] knotted itself into a rosette of color.

And as we have already mentioned in the chapter on characters, names also add to local color. In *Master Skylark* the writer has done careful research for English names typical of that period and of no other, such as Nick Attwodd, Fynes Morrison, and Robin Getty.

#### THE MORE PRIMITIVE SENSES

These should not be neglected in description. If we don't take special pains, we'll find ourselves giving visual descriptions only, with some slight reference to the sounds of voices insofar as they convey different emotions. But scenes should be set by ear and nose as well as by the eye.

Writers are often neglectful of sounds and scents, even of colors if they have had no special artist training. Writers are often heavy readers and have derived their impressions too much from the printed page alone, and the printed page is comparatively scentless and colorless; silent too, and is sel-

dom tasted. Here again, then, is good reason to use material which you have collected for yourself, with your own senses in direct contact with reality. Only so can you hope to convey to the reader the emotions and the vivid impressions you strive for. Secondhand stuff—and you cannot even be sure that much of which you read is as direct as that—material, that you get from someone else's book, should not go into your own if you can give fresh material to the reader.)

The sense of smell must once have been very important in our tribal history. Nothing else brings back such poignant memories. Nothing, in consequence, links a reader so closely to a scene described on paper, makes him fill in for himself the details which you have no space to supply. Anything in the gamut from delicate perfume to rank stench may induce this sharp nostalgia. As the effect depends upon some association of the smell with an event in the reader's past, no given odor can be depended upon to produce a given effect. One reader may by this association hate the smell of yellow soap, another be saddened by lavender, be stirred to chuckles by mention of hot pitch. Kipling has written with deep feeling of campfire smoke all around the world, from resinous hemlock to acrid camel-dung. A sun-drenched Eastern bazaar, a subway, or an old attic may be summoned instantly by the jinn of its characteristic odor. The smell of turpentine has been used to bring back the art-class tang in one of E.B.'s stories. Wet autumn leaves, new rubbers, the smell of radiators when the steam heat first goes on—the homelier the scents the more they will grip the reader, often unaware. Use smells all you can, but don't rely upon them for specific effect, as no two readers react in the same way. Their suggestion is tricky, but potent.

Mention of tastes is neglected by most writers unless they are specifically describing food or drink. But how about the taste of brass bedknobs when you were exceedingly young? Can you remember the sweet taste of sulphur fumes in the furnace room, the flavor of school ink, of cedar pencil? Less goes into the mouth for test as we grow older, but there's the flavor of salt sweat on the lips after tennis, of blood when a tooth has been pulled or someone has sought to improve one's manners and appearance with a hopeful punch. There's the drink of so-called nicotine from a foul pipe, the sickly taste (and it *is* taste rather than smell) of gangrene, and the impressions left by sorrel, grass stems, bakelite, vulcanite, rubber, string, celluloid, or even the glove you so unhygienically held between your teeth the other day when you were fumbling for change in your purse. In its effect upon a reader mention of tastes is less intense and more standardized than that of smells. We are only a little better off for a vocabulary of tastes than for smells. But that is scarcely a reason for not using appeals to the nose, and for almost completely neglecting appeals to the tongue and palate.

Sounds are quite commonly used, and we tend to over-work the impressions to be deduced from the way people sob, shrill, mutter, clamor, roar, and bellow. In contrast with the way we overwork our descriptions of the human voice, we are careless and perfunctory with the other sounds. Different kinds of footfalls are used, often in too hackneyed a manner, to show haste or stealth. Hoof beats and the note of auto engines seem to have caught on with the average writer, anyway in whodunit tales. But what has happened to all the other sounds? Poets run rings round us in their use. We have little excuse save laziness and lack of observa-

tion, for we have been provided with a lavish vocabulary of sounds. And whereas such words as we have for scent and for taste are largely nouns and adjectives, for sounds we have a grand list of crisp effective verbs, which are far more useful.

Words connected with the visual sense are also numerous. Sight is the one sense which civilized man has kept in working order. There is no need to suggest that you keep the appearance of things in mind when you write description. You are more likely to overdo this.

The sense of touch is little developed except in nocturnal animals and in relation to sex, which is scarcely as yet a subject for juveniles. Life so low in the order of creation as to have no eyes has often a tactile sensitivity, but we can scarcely interpret the mental reaction which follows the impact. It would seem offhand, that this sense is a tool which the writer can't use. But if we try we can get something: A chill draft on the back of the neck; a cooling breeze playing over bare legs; the stirring of one's remaining fur in response to an emotion, which is represented by what we call goose-flesh, or hackles rising, or hair standing on end; sand or mud between the toes; sensitive fingertips finding unexpected grit or slime repulsive, and rough hands disliking contact with wool or silk; the sensuous pleasure in stroking a healthy cat; reactions to heat and cold, dryness, and dampness, and even atmospheric pressure; there are really more reactions to the sense of touch than one realizes at first. Even physical pain may be included in the sense of touch; but there is little need to urge that you keep this in mind when writing, as it is certainly overdone.

In sum, then, let us try to keep as many of the five senses at work as we can, even though this is like trying to juggle

five balls at once. The more difficult ones to use are those which most repay us if we get them in at the right place. This is partly because they are the least overdone, and partly because they get down to something primitive inside the reader. Take this passage from *Homespun* by E.B.:

The first locust shrilled in the high maple beyond the orchard; the air pulsed with its long, thrilling call, and a sumac bush, gone early red, flamed like a torch against the heavy green of the pines. Little puffs flew up as Abbie's feet plop plopped in the thick soft dust of the road. Hot it was, perspiration drying on your mouth was salty when you ran your tongue round your lips.

Under the pines the air was dark and still, the earth cushion-soft with pine needles. Here, where the stream ran brown and gossiping, hung all the stored scents of meadow and woodland that curved down to meet the water, and on the dark pool, two yellow leaves floated, scarce moving with the current.

Father's voice, in the meadow beyond, and the creak and faint thump of wheels moving over sunbaked, uneven ground. Good they were haying this end of the meadow, 'twouldn't be so far to carry their dinner, and the shady spot under the elm might tempt them to a bit of rest. Haying time was hurry time, but all the same it didn't do for a man to swallow his victuals on the run.

An interesting contrast may be drawn between characters, each of whom reacts through different senses to the same stimulus. The simplest example is one character admiring the appearance of the gooseberry, another the taste, and the third objecting to its furriness. One can dislike the appearance, another the odor, of corruption. An artist may admire the iridescent slime on a pool, a sanitary engineer object to the stink. We've all known this sort of thing happen; it sel-

dom gets into books, though it should, as it is grand stuff for pointing up the differences between characters.

#### SENSES REACT TO ENVIRONMENT

It is a truism that blind folk develop the other senses to replace, as far as possible, the one lost. Your character should try to do the same in the dark, should listen more carefully, think through his fingers and feet, particularly if bare, as he gropes along, be alert to the fusty smell of a closed room, the earthy smell of a tunnel. In a dry atmosphere his sense of smell should vanish. On a damp day he should be quite stirred by the odors. How would his senses react to a fog at sea? Any differently than when fog-bound on a mountain? What happens when an explorer first comes back to civilization; are some senses more alert, others less so than they will be later? He will have difficulty in sorting out one conversation from a babble of others because his ear is unpracticed in selection. He may be blind to faces because strange gestures and new fashions in clothes catch his attention. He will have difficulty in remembering names, though he may have a clear impression, impossible to put into adequate words, of a facial expression coupled with a perfume or a cigar smoke. In other words, all his senses and sensuous reactions will differ from those of the people habituated to the environment, and from his own a few weeks later.

An engineer going into a haberdasher's will be blind to much that is obvious, and observant of details which would miss the ordinary customer's eye. A haberdasher going into a boilermaking factory would have all his senses dulled by the racket, a noise of which the riveter is almost unconscious. If you are writing a boys' story, don't emphasize how

noisy the playground is during recess; it isn't noisy to a boy reader.

All this may make description through the senses appear unduly difficult. But it all boils down to careful observation in the first place, and the exercise of imagination in putting yourself in the place of a character.

#### FAMILIAR OR STRANGE BACKGROUND

Where we have set our story in a time and country well known to most readers, our descriptions are naturally slight and only present the difficulty of trying to make the commonplace sound interesting. But where the setting is of a strange land in another age, then our position is reversed. There is little danger of the descriptions seeming commonplace and boring, but considerable care is required to feed in the large amount of material which is needed to show the reader in what circumstances the characters do their tricks and say their pieces.

It may help to explain the difference between strange and commonplace settings if we compare our writing problem with the artist's problem. A cartoonist can suggest with just a few strokes any well-known object, from a squirrel to an auto, and the onlooker will supply the rest from his imagination. But the few strokes of a cartoonist cannot convey the picture of a jerboa, or a machine for packaging chewing gum. A jerboa is not unlike a squirrel, and the packaging machine may be no more complicated than an auto, but the onlooker or reader cannot supply the blanks. Photos or scale drawings are needed, not half a dozen brush strokes.

Just as few cartoonists could get out scale drawings, so few writers can, with equal success, write both here-and-now tales of the present and then-and-there tales of the past. Yet

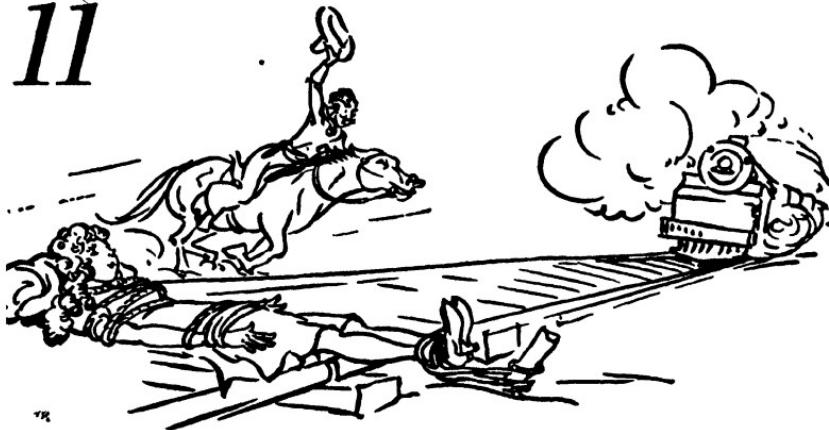
most of us try our hands at both. When we have started with stories of our acquaintances on our own front porch, we usually have a shot at historical or travel stories. It's good training anyway, keeps us learning more of our trade and saves us from getting into ruts. The special problems of the historical and travel story will be dealt with in detail under the heading "Facts into Fiction."

#### ATMOSPHERE

This is a term we're a shade shy of. There are a lot of Big Juju words in the Arts, intended to mean the utterly indescribable and undefinable. If you don't understand, you're a Philistine, and if you ask "What in hell is it?" there's a shocked silence, while one or more pale white hands describe puzzling curves in the air.

As far as we can get it, atmosphere is a result of a number of things, in fact, of all the things in a book. It's the place, the period, the feeling pervading the whole bag of tricks; the background, the characters, the speech, the writer's choice of words for narration. Even the shape of the plot contributes to it. Possibly the most important single item is the background or description. As far as we know it's just the smell. That's the best we can do for you. Our pale hands won't flutter.

# 11



## *Tricks of the Trade*

### **OLD MAN COINCIDENCE**

COINCIDENCE means a falling together, and in writing it is sometimes called "old nick o' time." The favorite coincidence is where two happenings are linked by time or place, or both, in such a way as to produce a result needed by the story. Neither of the happenings need be in itself remarkable, but the fact that they should coincide so conveniently for the story may make the reader say to himself, "That's too much of a coincidence." This feeling on the part of the reader is something we have to avoid.

It would arouse no doubt in the reader's mind if he were told that a man from Syracuse and a man from Baltimore met in an eating place on Broadway in New York. It is no more improbable than that people of any other towns should meet. But should some development of the story turn on their meeting, the reader will say that it is too hard to

believe that these two men, of all the world, should happen to meet in this way. And even if the reader will accept it, its ten-to-one your editor won't!

Now what are you going to do if you really must have them meet? There are, of course, a dozen ways of making the meeting seem probable, and you'll have to select one of them and, if you can, set it far enough back in the plot so that the reader will have accepted the explanation before his suspicions are aroused. This setting back may have the additional advantage, where you need it, of allowing the reader to forget, so that you still get the force of the surprise meeting. Let's take the simplest explanation which you might give your reader—that A goes to New York pretty frequently and, being a methodical kind of man, always lunches at the same place and at the same hour; that a friend of A, who is also a business acquaintance of B, has recommended this eating place to B. Well then, what more likely than that B, partly in the hope of meeting this mutual friend, goes to lunch there and bumps into A coming out?

If the ground for this explanation is given in a sufficiently matter-of-fact manner, just jotted in a bit here and a bit there and in unimportant words, it will never occur to the reader to doubt it. There's a point here about the unimportant words: if they were more emphatic or more striking, they'd not only distract attention from more important parts of the story, but they'd arouse the suspicion of the reader when he bumped into them, suspicion on the lines of "methinks he doth protest too much."

There is also the opposite method, the challenge to the reader to believe. The writer practically says, "This coincidence is utterly impossible. Such things don't occur." And the reader, contrary soul that he is, says, "Oh, yes, they do!"

And that's that. For instance, the hero is walking down the street. He is thinking hard of the one person in the world he wants to meet. Then suddenly out of the crowd appears that one person. "It was as though Jack's thought had materialized him out of the fog. Surely it was a miracle, surely this could not be Mr. Smith." At this challenge the reader, not wishing to believe that it was a miracle, accepts it as a matter-of-fact occurrence.

Another good example of the fate, or miracle, presentation is in the pages of *Anthony Adverse* by Hervey Allen.

The girl was standing directly opposite him across the nave. And of such a witches' bundle and mad faggot of chances is fate composed that if he had not happened to move a little to clear himself of the pillar [and by this time the reader is so tensed up that he'd almost move the hero himself] he might never have laid eyes on her at all. Or if he had seen her otherwise he might not have fallen in love. He might only have admired and yearned over her a little. Or he might not have really seen her. Her image might only have fallen upon his eyes with no penetration. *But he did move.* [The italics are our own.]

#### NICK O' TIME COINCIDENCE

This is an extreme form of coincidence, tied in with creating suspense. Let's take the old-fashioned pulp situation of the hero hanging over the cliff on a rope which the villain is sawing with a knife. Just at the last moment, when the last strand is parting, the rescue party gallops up.

There's almost nothing you can do to make the reader swallow this without at the same time spoiling the dramatic suspense. A steel core to the rope unknown to the reader beforehand? No, that's cheating. Our only advice is to leave the extreme nick o' time coincidence alone unless you are

writing for a very uncritical public. And the juvenile public, with its superadded librarians, schoolteachers, and parents, is not uncritical.

#### IMPROBABLE FACT

This needs distinguishing from improbable coincidence. If your hero, who is spinning on the end of a suspended rope, draws his six-shooter and shoots the knife out of the villain's hand as the latter leans gloating over the cliff edge, that is improbable in fact. It can be made to seem probable, at all events to one who knows little of firearms, by an easy trick—setting back a previous instance of the hero's marksmanship in a matter-of-fact manner. He may be shown earlier knocking a chicken hawk off a pole at an absurdly long range. Perhaps we make a friend show complete lack of interest and say that shooting is about all the man's capable of.

Superhuman or all but superhuman strength, skill, speed, and courage are seldom used in boys' books when the story is intended to be realistic. This is not because they are particularly hard to get over, but simply because they are no longer fashionable. The boy of today has not met such wonders in the flesh and can't identify himself with them as fictional characters.

#### COMING EVENTS FORESHADOWED

In the selection quoted from *Anthony Adverse* there is another effect worth noting: coincidence and its apology act as the fife and drum, the far-off sound of approaching fate. Something is going to happen! And when the parade rounds the corner and the reader knows that fate has pulled it off again, his mood is heightened to meet it.

In *The Splendid Spur* there is an excellent example of this build-up, this heightening of interest by the roll of drums offstage.

I crawled to my feet, rested a moment to stay the giddiness, and tottered across to the door, where I leant listening, gazing south. No strip of vapor lay on the moors that stretch'd—all bathed in the most wonderful bright colors—to the lip of the horizon. The air was like a sounding board. I heard the bleat of an old wether, a mile off, upon the tors; and was turning away dejected, when far down in the south, there came a sound that set my heart leaping.

Note how the writer has led into the sound by the earlier sound and the clearness of the air.

#### RISE AND FALL

A flat ground looks much the same whether it is at sea level or on a high plateau, and it is wearisome to the eye. If in plotting your story you climb at once to high sustained excitement and keep it at this level to the end, you will find, curiously enough, that it grows monotonous. You've climbed up to the plateau in the first chapter and have since traveled along level ground.

So we see that in plot it is useless to try to sustain excitement all the way. Any story needs contrast, needs hills and valleys. The excitement must subside for a moment, perhaps for a whole chapter, so that we can be more conscious of it when it returns again. You have to descend if you are going to climb anew; a story must rise and fall to avoid dead-level monotony.

You must think this out in your first arrangement of chapters so that your more static scenes may give release from, and add to, the effect of your more violent action. If

you haven't any naturally slow-moving scenes, you may need to flatten some scenes artificially so that they may point up the others. This is not obvious when one starts to write, particularly if one is writing adventure. Yet slight thought will suggest that this rule is only another facet of the universal rule that we notice only contrasts. Speed, to a passenger in a railway carriage or in an elevator, becomes unnoticeable; only acceleration or deceleration can be felt.

What is true for the whole book is also true for separate chapters within the book—there must be change or contrast. Elsewhere we have gone into change of camera angle to give this variety. But in action, for instance a hot chase, a change in the angle of presentation is not as a rule practicable. Yet there must be rise and fall in the acuteness of suspense.

The principle of rise and fall in a chase is to insert a toll gate, a flooded river, or some other obstacle which not merely adds a difficulty for the hero to overcome, but also gives the reader a momentary relief from the drumming hoof beats or whatnot. This brings us to

#### CHANGE OF TEMPO

This is really rise and fall in wording. There's a trick which you've probably already discovered for yourself, or you may even have been using it without knowing that you have: to make the beat of your words agree with the picture they are painting. (Short brisk words in choppy sentences suggest by their sound, as well as convey by their meaning, speed and urgency. Staccato phrasing should not be used to excess, however; it is too valuable to throw away, and if too long sustained makes irritating reading.)

"Coffee, big boy—quick. At the car door. And get a car—three minutes."

Pants, sweater, shoes, and overalls. Down the stairs. Gulp—coffee. The blue cup crashed on the flags. The car lashed gravel into the hedging, shot between granite gateposts. Roared down the road.

Now put this instance into ordinary wording and note how it slows down.

"Bring me a cup of coffee to the car door, big boy. As quickly as you can, I am in a hurry. Get me a car too, and have it ready within three minutes."

He put on his pants, his sweater, his shoes, and his overalls and swung down the stairs to gulp up his coffee. He was in such a hurry that he let the cup fall on the flagging where it broke.

The car was waiting and he let in the clutch with such a jerk that the wheels spun on the loose gravel and shot this into the hedge. Then the car passed between the granite gateposts and the engine note rose to a roar as he opened up.

You can see how most of the effect of speed is lost in the second version, and not because the character has moved more slowly or even asked for a cup of coffee in five minutes instead of three. It's just the writer's choice of words and use of complete sentences that has given the air of greater leisure.

You can work this trick of wording either to speed up or slow down the story, although the latter is rarely consciously done in prose. To express slow, sleepy, heavy movement or mood, use a full and complicated sentence structure and choose slow, ponderous leisurely nouns and static verbs enriched with polysyllabic adverbs and adjectives.

There is also the trick of slow enumeration of details that says to the reader, "Here, take a good look at this, this is

important." You get it, for instance, in a detective story. When the writer begins to delineate all that the detective has spotted, unconsciously the reader notes down the details and stores them in his memory.

A writer who is very interested in words and in the meaning of words and tends to become a little pedantic in their use, must guard against slowing down his action too much for present-day tastes. Here is an example in the stately phrases of yesterday:

A man of sensibility and ardent temper, he could now no longer refrain from regarding these clamors as the dishonest artifices of the sinister and unprincipled opposition to a plan which ought at least to receive a fair and candid examination.

Well, we've cut this quotation a little, but even so that isn't the way a hot-tempered man thinks. He's more likely to think, "Those damned crooks . . . !"

For the bulk of our book we must definitely aim at a point between the monotonous reassuring refrain and the jerked alarm of the staccato.

If you are musical, and still more if you are a bit of a poet, this tempo business will come naturally. An ear trained by much verbal storytelling will also give you the same happy knack. Tempo is only a small part of a larger thing called cadence, about which much has been written. The rules, if there really are rules, seem to us too elaborate to act as practical guides. All we can suggest is that when you are writing for very young children, listen carefully to your words.

#### EMPHASIS

A sentence in its normal order—subject, verb, object or indirect object, is unemphatic: "*The cat sat on the mat.*" A

transposition of the parts of speech marks the sentence for the reader's attention: "On the mat sat the cat." The unusual catches the eye and the attention, since the unusual in life has always struck a warning note.

We leave it to you, very meanly we admit, to experiment further with unorthodox punctuation and the repetition of the word "cat" or perhaps the word "mat."

#### REPETITION IN PLOT OR PHRASING

This occurs most recognizably in the old fairy tale structure. Eldest Prince goes out into the world and does a certain thing or series of things. The Second Prince goes out into the world and does a certain thing or series of things. But Youngest Prince goes out into the world and does something completely different.

What is the system back of it? The mind expects the third prince to repeat again, and when he doesn't, it receives a pleasant surprise. In *Sojo* we used this method with, at intervals, a repetition of phrase to introduce a repetition of plot, and a final break for the sixth day of the week in which the pattern swings off sharply in contrast to the pattern of the others.

The repetition of phrase does the same thing:

"I liked that zebra," said Araminta, "because she went running so fast."

"I liked that tiger," said Jerome Anthony, "because he looked something like my cat."

"I liked that hippopotamus," said Araminta, "because he had such a long name."

"But I liked the rabbits best of all," said Jerome Anthony, "because they look *exactly* like the rabbits that live in the country."

Here even the beginning of the final sentence with a "but" gives it a kick.

The effect of this repetition depends on carefully balanced timing. Too short a repetition does not produce the effect; too long a repetition is wearisome. There is no rule; it depends partly on your age group; the younger groups will stand more of it than the older groups. The effect gained also depends on sentence structure, on choice of words, on transpositions not only of plot form but of sentence structure and of choice of words, and runs also into cadence.

The only way to insure that you have struck the delicate balance in jingle between the pleasing and the irritating is to do as did the old-time tribal bard, as does the Oriental storyteller and the modern librarian and kindergarten storyteller: try it out verbally upon an audience of the age group for which you are writing.

Kipling, perhaps because he was a poet as well as storyteller, did it with beautiful effect in the *Just So Stories*, all of which are based on timing and repetition.

The scrambling of the pattern in "The Beginning of the Armadillos" is worth noting. First we get the Mother Jaguar, graciously waving her tail.

"My son, when you find a Hedgehog you must drop him into the water and then he will uncoil. . . ."

Then:

"When you scoop water with your paw you uncoil it with a Hedgehog. Remember that because it's important."

And:

"*But* when you paw your meat you drop it into a Tortoise with a scoop. Why can't you understand?"

This is delicious nonsense, and parodying the former pattern manages also to emphasize it.

#### **ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS**

Would you mind having now what sounds like a short lecture to the class? It'll make what we have to say so much clearer if we start from the very beginning.

It is believed that the very early languages had a great number of nouns because separate words were needed to denote each object which entered into the life of the people. It was as though each object had a personal name—Bill or Bob or Henry or Ted. Just one thing; one name. It is said that the Tierra del Fuegians have a vocabulary of more than twenty thousand names of things. We may still retain a relic of this, for instance, in all the separate names of the separate kinds of horses, such as destrier, palfrey, nag, hack, charger, stallion, roan, palomino, maverick, mustang. But quite early in man's development his reasoning faculties and power of observation led him to group and classify things which were similar and to give them, as it were, a family name. Having grouped them together, he then found words—adjectives, we would call them—to attach to the group noun, to indicate one particular thing or animal within this group.

Almost the same process as this, which produced group nouns and descriptive adjectives, appears to have produced verbs and their descriptive adverbs, though perhaps very much later. A nice simple verb like "say" covered many different ways of imparting information—yell, howl, shriek, mutter, murmur, and so on. A word like "go" would cover many different ways of moving from one place to another;

and then to distinguish which method of movement was used, adverbs were tacked on. "He went quickly," "he went lingeringly," "he went slowly."

We can see then that a noun may cover or denote a large number of things: man; or less, American; or still less, Philadelphian; until we get down to the extreme end, Bill, who in our mind denotes just one man.

But as the denotation, that is, the number of objects to which the noun applies, kept decreasing as we went from man down to American, to Philadelphian, to Bill; so the connotation, the number of things which the word told us about the objects to which it applies, its qualities as it were, increased. An American means a certain kind of man, a man of America. A Philadelphian is not only a man and an American man, but an American man of Philadelphia. And when we get down to Bill we've got a pretty fair picture of what he looks like, what he sounds like, what we think are his mental characteristics.

The practical application of this bit of general knowledge to writing is that the word of greater connotation, that is, the more descriptive word, which is also the word of less denotation, that is, the word that covers the smaller group of objects, should usually be chosen. It saves cluttering up our book with adjectives to qualify our nouns or adverbs to qualify our verbs.

"Dotard," if this obsolescent word will suit our type of writing, means not only a man, but an old and foolish man. "Ran" not only means went, but went quickly, on foot, using a certain gait.

In general, the word of higher connotation and lower denotation will be less timeworn and hackneyed than the

more general word. For this reason it is often much more forcible. "Connotation and denotation" might also be termed "intension and extension." The word of high connotation or intension is more specific; the word of high denotation or extension is more general. It doesn't matter which terms you use, as long as you remember that each noun or verb lies, as it were, to one side or the other and that we should use the word with the highest connotation which is the most intensive, or the most specific. Thus we will get exactness and richness and also simplicity in style through one elimination of many adjectives and adverbs. The only caution is that in doing so your phrasing may become too terse and seem overemphatic and that you may here and there use a word so uncommon as to be too striking.

Adjectives supporting weak-kneed nouns are bad enough, but when these same adjectives require the support of adverbs in order to help prop up the nouns—adverb qualifying adjective qualifying noun—we should certainly stop and consider. We are probably being careless, or else we are not even thinking. A weary writer who is producing dull, hackneyed stuff may catch himself bringing in, again and again, "very," "exceedingly," "quite," or even trying to produce the same effect with exclamation marks !!!

#### WORDS DON'T SCARE

Don't for a moment think that a boy or a girl reader minds a strange word if the context explains it. They are at the stage where they are meeting something new at every turn, in life as well as in books. Didn't you, when you were young, enjoy some of Kipling's fancy words? The only obstacle you'll have to overcome is the belief of adults that words which frighten them will also frighten the young.

**QUALIFYING CLAUSES**

Slightly linked with the above dissertation on adjectives and adverbs, their use and more general abuse by the writer who is too careless to select his nouns and verbs, is the problem of the qualifying clause. There's one use of this which we should certainly try to avoid: the interjection of an idea which hasn't much to do with that particular sentence but which we need to get in somehow:

John Jones, who was a man of forty-two, again took up his hat. This leaves the reader puzzled as to why his being a man of forty-two should make him take up his hat. We wanted to mention his age, but we certainly hadn't any intention of conveying by his age and by his taking up his hat that he was starting to go bald.

John Jones, who had only just arrived, again took up his hat. The "who had only just arrived" fits in; it may imply that he had expected to stay a little longer, but a cold reception, or not finding his host at home, caused him to leave shortly.

Don't, of course, use the qualifying clause where you can use an adjective or adverb; for example, "the dotard," already changed to "the foolish old man," becomes elaborated into "the man whose intellect, owing to his age, was growing weak," or some equally clumsy periphrasis.

**ORDER OF EVENTS**

The normal order in which events should be set down is the order in which those events are supposed to have happened in the story. This is because we are trying to make our story seem like real life. In a book for the younger groups of readers, certainly up to twelve years old, keep to this order

to make it easier for the young reader to follow. Since this type of story usually covers only a short space in time and follows the doings of just one character, or at the most a very small group of characters, it is easier to write.)

With the more sophisticated juveniles you may find that you have to abandon this natural order. You may be juggling several characters at once, not all on the scene at the same time, so that you take your hero as far as the events of Thursday morning and then go back and catch up with what happened to other characters, even the week before, if those happenings are an essential part of the story. Where you can, however, avoid this. Boy readers especially seem to dislike it, and it is more usual in feminine than in masculine writing.

But where you have to use this swing-back in rounding up your strayed characters, try to use it with a dual purpose; let your second purpose be to build suspense, even if slight, by breaking from your main thread at a time when something exciting is happening, and returning to it a chapter later. If, instead, you leave your hero just eating his breakfast, during the swing-back the reader will have built up no eagerness to return and find out what has happened.

This break for suspense applies only to the main characters; minor characters can often be brought back with a slight explanation, in their own words, of where they have been in the meantime. All this, of course, has to be done in the plot structure.

The main thing is for the writer himself not to forget his characters, so that when he does recall them he has to bring them back with a pop, like the Cheshire cat. It is even possible that the cat's odd appearances and disappearances were the quick invention of the mathematics professor who

was suddenly confronted with his small listeners' demand of "Where was the cat all this time?"

#### ARTIFICIAL REARRANGEMENT

The swing-back is used by the writer not only where he is forced to, but where he thinks an artificial rearrangement of order will help to sustain interest. It is most commonly used where the setting of the scene is too complex to allow the action of the story to get into its stride in the opening paragraph. So the writer, who after much struggle has reached his character and his action in, say, the third paragraph, boldly switches this to the front and lets the first and second paragraphs become paragraphs two and three.

Another optional use of swing-back, but one to use with caution, is where, by some error or laxness in plotting, there are too many high spots of excitement together and then a long, dull road ahead. Or when it is necessary to describe the action of two characters who are in different places at the same time. It then becomes a matter of choice—how much of one character's actions may be described before reverting to the other character's movements. But when you come to the second character there must, obviously, be a swing-back in time.

As a broken time-sequence is irritating to a boy reader, try first by careful plotting to avoid the need for this artificial rearrangement of events. Where you are forced to rearrange, do so in large, obvious chunks. Be sure to warn your reader of the swing-back, even if it's only with the word "meanwhile," or "on this same Thursday," or some clinching comparison of the weather or the season. In one book we used a comet as a time mark to correlate scenes set on two different continents.

Don't write whole pages in the pluperfect tense—"he had done this and then he had done that." If you must start your paragraph with this, drop it after a moment, and the reader's mind will slide naturally into the more customary past tense.

Where information about the past really must be brought in, but at the same time isn't bulky or doesn't require much movement, the simplest way and perhaps the most effective is to drop it in by means of people's thoughts or remarks without halting your story. There are various tricks of the trade; you could, for instance, have an old gas-bag who keeps reminiscing, provided you cut him short each time as soon as he's fed in the material that you need.

#### CHASES AND RACES

Few books of adventure can dispense with a chase or a race. The chase of, or by, a mysterious enemy, the race against time, the overhanging menace that may topple at any moment, or any other refurbished version of the sword of Damocles—these are the very element of adventure. A chase is almost your most valuable asset and can be used even two or three times in different ways in one book.

Your chase, however, must not be written simply as a chase. It must overlay some other action or emotion in order to get richness of technique. For instance, if you can start your story with a chase, it serves as an excellent opening, and all the way through its progress you can season your movement by bits of information, the chase hiding from the reader that he is being thus tempted to eat dry facts.

In one particular story we found the first chapter as dry as dust when we had finished; nothing happened, nothing clicked, nothing seemed to move, though actually there was

movement enough. We rewrote it in the form of a chase, as the story easily supplied that ingredient. At the end of the chase, which took about five pages, the reader knew his characters, knew their directions and aims and a little of the unfolding plot.

If it is necessary to have your farm boy race to the nearest town for the doctor (perhaps in a storm which supplies him with obstacles, with fences and hurdles to punctuate the race), and later you want him to have a race against time to get the hay carried from the south field before the storm breaks, cast these two chapters well apart in your plot structure. Leave in between them a chapter or two of slow development of plot and character. The contrast between the peaceful chapter or chapters and those of quick, anxious races will make the story more attractive.

#### THE CHASE, PURSUER, AND PURSUED

A chase can be written from the viewpoint either of the fox or of the hound. The hero or hound is pursuing the villain or fox. Or the hero or fox is being pursued by the villain or hound. Or, of course, you can write either of these from the viewpoint of the villain. Which viewpoint you use will depend on what emotion you wish to arouse. Naturally the fox does not feel about the chase as does the pursuing hound. But here's a warning: If you want to be realistic and not just conventional, you must not see the pursuer just enjoying a delayed triumph, licking his lips, as it were, for what is to come; the pursuit may be to him an agony of anxiety. Nor must you of necessity see the pursuer as frightened stiff; he may be an optimist and rejoice in what he believes to be his superior speed and cunning. The chase is easier to handle effectively than the race, presumably be-

cause its flesh-and-blood pursuers and pursued stir a more primitive response in the reader.

#### THE RACE AGAINST TIME

Since you are unlikely to turn Time or Fate into a character in your juvenile story, the race against time is never told from the viewpoint of the pursuer, only from that of the pursued. A writer may have to race against an editorial deadline; this is pure "Race." In the old melodrama the carrier of the last-minute pardon for the condemned man was also racing against time. But set enemies on the carrier's trail whose purpose it is to steal or delay the pardon, and you have both Race and Chase.

It clarifies matters if we define Race as a struggle against Time, and Chase as a struggle against an animate pursuer, wolf, or what-have-you. But by a slight personalization of the time element you can write a Race against Time almost as a Chase. A clock fatefully ticking off the minutes, the personalization of the mortgager, who, in alliance with Time, is waiting to foreclose, can give added effect to the struggles of a hero or heroine against the real enemy, Time.

The race against time, whether it is the old-fashioned melodrama of the mortgage payment falling due or a less hackneyed equivalent, can, when properly handled, stir the emotions quite profoundly. Witness any of Conrad's stories; and many detective stories where something has to happen before a certain time. The suspense chapter ending is based on this principle. You can think of dozens of examples, from Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" to the child who simply has to get a present for her mother by Christmas, or any of the better fairy tale plots.

**THE STALE WORD**

There are words which are perfectly sound in themselves but which the public has made stale from overuse or misuse. The worst of these has for some years past been "psychology." It has been taken from its normal meaning as the "science of the mind" and misused in such phrases as "It is Communist psychology" and "the psychology of Scarlett O'Hara." We have even heard "He ain't got no psychology," and "I gotta psychology about selling." No one would think of saying, "Her psychology has dropped twenty pounds on the new diet." There is no need to use the unfortunate word psychology as a highfalutin synonym for "mind," "viewpoint," "idea," or even "ideology." "Streamlined" is another such overused word.

There is a second and more dangerous group, those which we ourselves, as authors, overuse and make stale. There is no advance warning of what kind of words they will be, whether noun, verb, adverb, or even short phrase; one may appear at first in a normal manner, then begin to visit more frequently, then simply haunt the manuscript. And when we have finished digging out "amazingly" from ten different parts of one story we may discover that "danced" or "incredible" or "as a matter of fact" have riddled the story which follows. Some day someone will invent a good mouse-trap for these pests; meanwhile a good editor or a hard-boiled collaborator is a help.

**THE CLICHÉ**

Our French dictionary gives the meaning of cliché as "stereotyped." The picture which this suggests is of several

words fused together in one block, so that when you print one you print all, whether they really fit into the context or not. There is no clear division between this and the hackneyed phrase. The "long arm of coincidence," or our old friend psychology again in "the psychological moment," are good examples. The politician for a year or two seemed unable to "try"; instead, he would "leave no stone unturned," as though he were looking for fishing bait, or, doubtless with solar topee, compass, and band of faithful natives, "explore every avenue." If you want further instances, consult *Modern English Usage* by Fowler under the headings "Cliché" and "Hackneyed Phrase." (If you pay a business call upon this book you will stay to be entertained.)

The only way to keep out such intruders is to think hard as you write, to see pictures, characters, and events so clearly that only the right word fits. If you are tired or lazy and your imagination produces blurred outlines and vague thoughts, almost any set of words will seem adequate. One word leads in another word which is its frequent traveling companion, even though the second word barely fits. The hackneyed phrase slides in because the associated sounds of the words are restful to the tired or lazy writer. But a rested writer means a bored reader.

#### SIMILES

Here you must be most on your guard. "Fresh as a daisy!" "dewy as the morn," "sweet as a rose," "like hunting for a needle in a haystack"—as soon as you see those words "like" or "as" approaching, be on your guard. They flow off the typewriter without effort. "Thin as a rake," "old as the hills," "ugly as sin," "like water off a duck's back," "dry as a bone"—how hackneyed these can be!

As a qualification the simile is clumsy anyway. Take "red as a rose," and see what we can find out about it. Does it convey any particular shade of red? A rose can be anything from deep purplish red to pale yellow. Does it mean very red? Maybe. In that case, what is wrong with "very," or "exceedingly," or "intensely"? And if you are a person of any feeling, isn't it borne in upon you that this phrase was worn out by ruthless songwriters before you ever set hand to typewriter?

Where you use similes, use them for a double purpose; not merely to describe the object to which it is likened but to transfer its effect, to imply, in fact, something which is not written at all. Here is an example, obviously not drawn from a juvenile book:

The sun, red as a drunkard's eye, rose between clouds as depressing as a four days' beard, and the man on the park bench removed the dew-drenched newspaper from his legs, smoothed and folded it.

Now the sun might have been rose-red, or anything else you like, but "red as a drunkard's eye" slips in a mean insinuation against the man on the park bench. Added to the "depressing as a four days' beard," we've just about called him a hobo. If a simile is ever justified, it is in order to slip in these insinuations and bits of local color. Used in this way, they are very effective in books for older juveniles. The simile helps to jot in some spot of local color, time, or period.

His words were few, but like the tools of a good craftsman, sharp and well polished.

It was as though the Nile herself should suddenly cease flowing north and flow south.

We used this form of simile in *Honey of the Nile*. To make the reader as Nile-conscious as we felt the ancient Egyptians would have been, we said, "like seeking an eel in Nile mud." Here the needle in the haystack simile would have been ridiculous.

The two most obvious points regarding the use of simile are that it must not be out of the scene—"red as a beetroot" would be out of place in a sea yarn, distracting the reader's attention; and that it must not be out of period—"red as a fire truck" would not fit your story of colonial days.

Finally, a mistake, but one rather hard to avoid, is where the implication in the simile works against the meaning you are trying to convey:

The gleam welcomed her across the snow, growing brighter, warmer, red as a traffic light.

Now the light in a farmhouse window may have been this shade of red, but a red traffic light has come to be associated in our minds with a warning or obstacle, not with a welcome. This is an instance so obvious you wouldn't be likely to use it, but less obvious ones are waiting to sneak in on the simile addict.

#### SLANG

If the cliché is the pointlessly conservative, slang is the party of the Left. Everyone is consciously or unconsciously experimenting with speech, and writers ought to be sympathetic with those who try to refurbish old ideas in a new fashion. Slang must date back to the earliest days of speech. Chaucer, to whom Spenser referred as "Don Chaucer, well of English undefiled," and whose work is taught in schools and colleges as a classic, is rich with it. "Step on thy feet,

com out man." (Step on it, man.) "Now hold your mouth." (Hold your jaw.) "The priest he made his ape." (Made a monkey out of him.) "'Ye, hasel-woode,' thought this Pandare." (Yah, apple sauce.) "Wel hath this miller vernisshhed his head." (The miller was varnished, pickled, oiled, boiled, stewed, or anything else.) "His hony dere" scarcely needs translating. "Ye slee me, verrailly" is used with almost the extreme exaggeration of the more modern "Bill, you simply slay me!"

We ought to delete that last paragraph, which quotes slang that has remained part of our language for nearly six hundred years, for it seriously weakens our next point. Alternately we could modify it by showing a yet longer list of Chaucer's slang which is now ridiculous or almost incomprehensible. To save you from a long and tedious word list, may we be allowed to plead that Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the King James translation of the Bible do break rules which lesser writers cannot afford to?

For the fact is that slang is generally so ephemeral that the ordinary writer must treat it with special caution. Slang, as distinct from cant and dialect, is neither a professional jargon called forth to express specialized ideas nor a survival from another language. Very frequently it is a conscious attempt to reclothe a tediously old idea in novel or more exaggerated terms, which for a time are fresh to the speaker or listener.

Whether it is plugged by a radio comedian or current at the soda counter or the locker room, its one virtue is its dash of novelty. Once the novelty has worn off, the phrase or word is derided as outmoded, and forgotten; in the standard language only the more sturdy words and phrases survive. In consequence their invaliding and death rate is lower than

with more experimental slang. Even where you put slang quite correctly into the mouth of a character, it should be done with the knowledge that this will "date" the book, date it as surely as putting a character in an extreme of fashionable dress. To use the word "skidoo" or dress your heroine in trained street garb and feather boa would be absurd today, for both are obsolete. And our slang and our fashions will be as absurd and stupid in a few more years.

#### CANT

Between slang, which is novelty-talk, and cant, which is the words and phrases used by a particular class, or used by them in a special sense, there is no clear dividing line. Broadway talk may be mainly slang, medical students' talk mainly cant, i.e., introducing technical terms of their profession. Theater talk, soldiers' talk, which drags in words from four or five languages picked up during foreign service, schoolboy talk—how much of each is artificially invented to brighten dull thoughts, and how much to express the special interests of their group or profession, for which standard English has no suitable words or only elaborate circumlocutions?

Gangster talk is naturally closely allied to the older thieves' cant which was, perhaps is, largely designed so that an outsider should not understand. Nearly five centuries ago François Villon wrote a whole poem in underworld argot. Later attempts to translate this into English have given us other interesting vocabularies of tough talk.

#### DIALECT

Not to be confused with either slang or cant, but mixing with both, is dialect or patois. This derives mainly from

traces of a foreign language. Yiddish may enter into Broad-wayese, Celtic into Cornish English. Dialect belongs to a place or nation rather than to a class or profession.

#### USES OF SLANG, CANT, AND DIALECT

Here's what we think about slang, cant, dialect. They are all three excellent for giving color to your characters, for enriching a setting, for defining your time and locale—but each calls for special caution.

Slang depends for its effect on being bang up-to-date, the last word of fashion. If you remember that it will date your story and are careful to use the correct slang of that date, you can do little harm.

Cant requires care in using the exact phrases and words of the specialized group or profession into whose mouths you are putting it. Time, to within a few years, matters less than in slang. But don't make a naval man speak of being "on a boat" when he means "on a ship." Don't make an English crook talk of a "rod" or a "gat" unless you want to imply that he is a movie fan as well as crook. Be painstaking about the speech of any group of enthusiasts, for another enthusiast may read you, and no other error will so affront him as a misuse of his favorite vocabulary. In writing for juveniles be particularly careful.

A point worth noting is that specialized groups often drop out of currency the words one would expect them to use most. Perhaps they do it out of boredom or because the word is implied anyway. Why, for instance, mention the word "horse" if you and your friends seldom speak of anything else? We have heard people run through the most elaborate post-mortem on a fox hunt without once mentioning "ride" or "horse." Each word used was of greater

intension and less extension—"that roan which looks like Major Murray, forget her name," and "bucketing across a patch of plow."

The most important thing to remember about dialect is not to overuse it, and don't go in for too comic spelling. Touch it in lightly, as Chaucer did in his speech of the two Cambridge undergraduates from the north, to give an additional richness.

### STYLE

— You cannot help developing a style of writing, just as you have a style of walking and a style of, say, eating asparagus. There's nothing mysterious about style; it's just your choice of words, phrases, cadence, yes, everything from plot to punctuation in a wider sense, which marks your writing off from ours or somebody else's. The more you write the more your way of writing becomes a reflection of your personality.

### GOOD STYLE

Ah, that's a matter of dispute, and harder to explain. Obviously your words must convey your meaning accurately and concisely no matter what form of writing they are used in, from the scientific treatise to the song or poem. Since the written word is still closely associated with the spoken word, and the majority of your readers are conscious of the sound of the words they read, you must write what would sound pleasant if read aloud. (The younger the age group for which you write, the more you must consider this.) In addition to this selection for sense and sound, your style as a story-writer depends on the thoughts which you are also translating into words and onto paper.

(Choosing the word which has the exact shade of meaning

you require is a matter of care, of constant care, to every writer. Choosing a succession of words whose sounds do not jar, and whose combination helps out the feeling which their meaning aims to convey, is far harder to some of us than to others. Here self-criticism and practice are essential.

As a general definition of style, applicable to all forms of writing, we like this by Elmer Davis: "To have something to say, and to say it as clearly as you can. . . ."

#### PRINCIPLES OF WRITING ✓ & MY

The rules we have discussed are in no sense laws. They are not exact and immutable laws of nature, such as are laws of physics. Nor are they like man-made laws which we are required to follow. They are simply principles which we believe we can detect in the juvenile stories we have read. We have certainly made of them, without ill effect, in our own writing. It will pay you not to think of them as being more than working hypotheses; consider them as ideas to be accepted if they seem true when checked against your own experiments, or rejected if they ring false.

And it will certainly pay you to take apart adult books, movies, plays, and magazine stories to find out how they work. They use many tricks of the trade in more extreme form than we dare in juvenile stories, and so show more clearly their effect.

Experiment freely, for paper is cheap; and if you don't experiment you won't learn and grow. Time out for learning may reduce next year's income, but it is an investment for the future.

Keep in touch with reality; don't become just another writer, or some day you will have plenty of words but noth-

ing worth saying. Some writers dry up early, while others go on producing good stuff, interesting stuff, almost to their last days. As long as you are interested you are likely to remain interesting to your reader. Travel if you can, work hard at hobbies in the brief time you have to spare for them. And, above all, learn to like your fellow men of all ages, of all races, of both sexes, and of all grades of income and occupation. If you don't, your mind will shut them out and you'll never be able to understand them well enough to portray them convincingly. This should be obvious, for no one has ever written well about even an inanimate object, such as a locomotive, unless he had an affection for it.

Break any rule if you like—but break it intentionally, and never through ignorance, sloppy-mindedness, carelessness, or laziness. Often by breaking a rule you can produce a more effective result than by sticking to it slavishly.

Exceptions to rules should in all matters be intentional.



## *Sharpen Your Scissors γ*

AND now that your manuscript is finished and the neat pile of paper lies face down upon your desk, sharpen your blue pencil and get to work. Pruning, cutting, ruthless blue-pencilings, lies before you. It's important to know what to put in. But when that's finished, it's just as important to know what to cut out.

### WORD WEEDING

First you will go through and cut out all the extra "very's," all the "tiny's," and "little's," and then all the apologetic words such as "he *obviously* thought," "she *probably* knew." Cut adjectives and adverbs; make your verbs—strong husky creatures that they are—carry the burden. The more qualifying adverbs there are to a verb, the weaker the verb. Go through again and cut out the clichés. Perhaps at first you were in too much of a hurry to get down that great thought to notice just *how* you were getting it down. Cut the words you overworked; there are always a few that run through the mind of an author, even a great one, until they are frazzled to death.

**PET PARAGRAPHS**

Then go back and see how much you can condense by rephrasing, how you can tighten a page by leaving out a whole paragraph that isn't really important. Don't be scared of the blue pencil; if, when the manuscript is in its final copy, you miss that pet paragraph, you can always go back and write it in again. But you'd be surprised how seldom you remember where it went.

**LEARN BY CUTTING**

Just as a medical student learns more from practical dissection than from his anatomy books, so the writer learns more from correcting his own manuscript than from generalized rules on writing. Cutting calls for clear thinking to discover what can, with advantage, be left out of a story; for self-discipline to make the excisions; and for practice to sew up the wounds neatly with the shortest suture of sentences. Like the surgeon, the writer discovers what a surprising amount may be removed from the patient without damage.

**EDITORIAL CUTTING**

Editors' suggestions for cuts are usually excellent, but it is scarcely fair to rely upon them for what is after all the writer's job. They naturally prefer a manuscript which fits neatly into their magazines or their book-list, to something, perhaps even a little better, on which they must waste their time.

**SERIAL CUTTING**

It is often necessary to cut your serial, planned for one magazine, to the needs of another magazine. This, too, is ex-

cellent practice. You will sometimes find that the cherished chapter, over which you labored with so much affection, is just the one the editor wants dropped; and the one you wrote in with the special intention of lopping off later, for serial needs, is the one the editor, perverse soul, wishes retained. But even a mild suggestion by an editor that certain cuts are desirable should be complied with. Your willingness, your ability, to cut and expand in any known direction, gives an editor a feeling of confidence in you as a self-disciplined workman, and, incidentally, will also tend to add to your own confidence as well as to your experience. Sufficient control over his medium, to fit his product exactly to the market, is the mark of the professional, as distinct from the bright and lucky amateur.

#### THE HOBBY HORSE

In other words, any theory, subject, character, mannerism, or what not that particularly appeals to the writer is sure to need the blue pencil. You are certain to have given them undue space, even if they fitted the story and that place in the story. You may have written them so warmly that they have undue prominence. You may have written them so well, because they interest you, that they make the surrounding writing flat. Anyway, you have no right to ride hobby horses during business hours.

#### CUTS BY COLLABORATOR

These are likely to be stern and drastic. You may be lenient with yourself or flout an editor occasionally, but the man or woman who works opposite you has no drop of human pity in his or her make-up and will come back again and again to insist on the cut.

**CUTS IN SET-BACKS**

Still more cuts will be needed in connection with this. No matter how carefully planned, no story finishes at its appointed goal. One character has reacted upon another, new ideas have suggested themselves in the course of writing, so that the beginning and middle were written with a different end in view. You will, of course, need to go back and plant in the set-backs, which you have noted down as leads to what you had not realized was going to develop later. You will also, if you are conscientious, have a second list of notes—"He couldn't have been so cheerful in chapter two if he'd been planning what came off in chapter five. So take the grin off his face." Or the more drastic requirement by your collaborator—"Can't have chapter seven through the eyes of Character A; identifies the reader's sympathy with him too much to allow you to kill him in last chapter. Go back and cut out all A's reactions and use Omniscient Author camera angle." And apart from these, there will be a number of leads which you set in and which weren't used. Can you hunt these up and cut them out? The book will benefit if you do, for a reader dislikes being led up blind alleys.

The chapter which made you so enthusiastic in the writing is the one which in revision must be searched most critically for possible excisions. Warm enthusiasm and cold critical ability don't go together, and author-love leaves one blind to the imperfections of the offspring. To compensate for this, the pages which refused to work out as you had planned them, which called for prolonged struggle and the employment of all the technique which you have painfully

acquired, are likely to be free from clichés, hobby horses, and malignant growths.

Your chapters may seem grand at the time they are written. But the most merciful judgment you can accord them on later reading should be "The best I could do *then*." When you have finished a book, you should be able to start again and write it better. Of course, you have no time for this wholesale rewriting if you need to earn an income, but you always have time to use your pruning knife. Too often "the written word remains" merely because it is written. There are writers to whom almost every word is sacred, writers who are constructive, sometimes brilliantly so, but who lack self-criticism. However good they are, they will never get better; for one of the most important stages in a writer's growth is when he discards all sentimental affection for the words he has so anxiously fathered.

# 13



## *Naming the Baby*

Now that you have your story, what are you going to call it? Because second only in importance to the story is the title. There are even some writers who claim, not without reason, that the name is anywhere from fifty to eighty per cent of the book, that if you have a good title the book will sell, regardless of the contents.

This may be true of an adult book, but it is not quite so true of a juvenile. No matter how good the title, the juvenile won't sell on its name alone—not to the realistic youngster.

In adult fiction the old-fashioned title, which told you pretty much what the story was about, has gone out of fashion. The label on the juvenile, however, must bear some indication of the contents—the age of the reader, the location of the story, the time of the story, and even whether it is for boys alone or for boys and girls. This seems a large order

for a few short syllables. Some editors even ask for a one-word title! ]

It is fortunate for us that English is a very unprejudiced language and will take unto itself words belonging to other races, other climates, other times. We have words like "safari," "trek," "tour," "voyage," "pilgrimage," "caravan"; each means travel of one kind or another, but each word has a color of its own through having been borrowed from a different language, Swahili, Persian, Latin, Dutch, and so on; each means travel under different conditions and in a different place, or perhaps in a different time, from our own. This helps a lot in building titles. A safari, for instance, is a very particular kind of travel and brings with it a picture of East Africa, lions, elephants, hunters, heat, adventure; this is an entirely different picture from that carried by the word "pilgrimage" or "caravan."

Such one-word titles as *Fingerfins* (with the further explanation in the subtitle, *The Tale of a Sargossa Fish*), *Ring-tail*, *Challenge*, are good. There is a tendency to use Boy, or Girl, in juvenile titles; this gives the age and sex group. *Boy with a Pack*, *Circus Boy*, and *Boy of the South Seas*, are good, as was *The Winged Girl of Knossos*, which also served to tie the flying incidents in the story to the interests of the modern reader. The "shoes" titles, by implication feminine, are excellent; *Ballet Shoes*, *Circus Shoes*. *Boy of Tyros*, *Hudson Frontier*, and *Gunsmith's Boy* serve to locate the contents both in place and historical period.

Sometimes you can use the name of your main character for your title. But unless the name is striking this is not advisable. Mary Jane Smith would probably slip through the mind of the prospective reader, but such name titles as *Hepatica Hawks*, *Mr. Tidy Paws*, *Caddie Woodlawn*,

*Honey Jane*, and *Mary Poppins* are exceptions and register easily in the memory.

If the imagination of the young reader can be caught by the adventure quality of the title, then the small hand that wavers along the library shelf will reach to pluck out your volume, and you have made another sale—or another library reader at any rate. Such titles as *Windy Island*, *Men Against the Sea*, *Falmouth for Orders*, *Try All Ports*, *Call of the Wild*, and *Unrolling the Map*, arouse, even in the adult reader, a desire to go further, to follow where adventure beckons.

Some writers prefer to wait until after the book is finished before they title it. Often, however, this results in a frantic scramble to get a name. E.B. prefers to have her title even before she starts to plot, though this is not always possible. Sometimes the name, such as *Honey of the Nile*, will suggest itself during the course of plotting; this occurred when we planned to make the Karnak Temple beekeeper one of the two main characters. On the other hand, *Home-spun* was chosen for a title almost two years before the book was written, and suggested the course of the plot. *Go and Find Wind* emerged during the research. Gathering material on early South Street in New York's clipper-ship days, we found the skipper's protest to an owner, "But sir, we cannot sail. There is no wind." "Go then, and find wind," was the order.

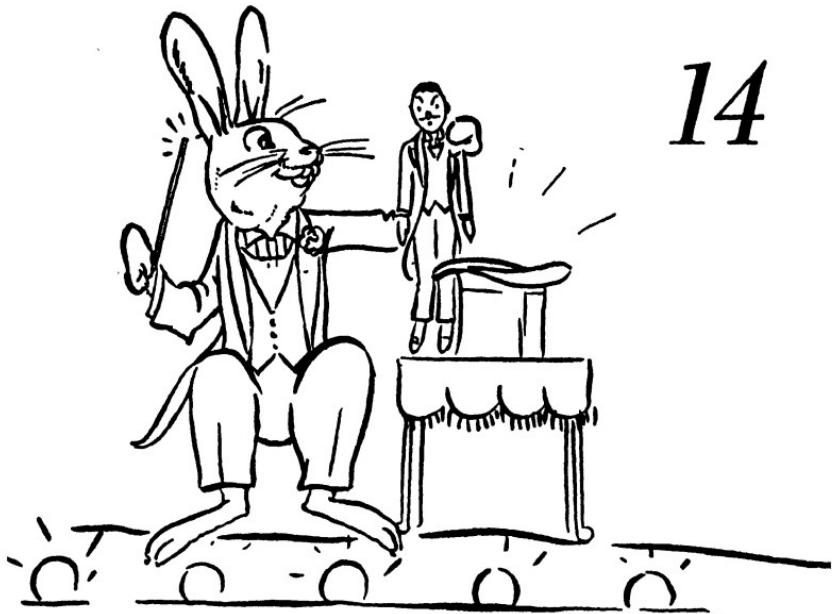
Your title must also be easy to pronounce. For instance, we titled one book *Flag of the Jihad*. The Jihad is the religious war of Muslim against Christian which in Mohammedan countries may flame up at any time; we felt it was sufficiently exciting to carry the book. But two things were wrong: Jihad could not be pronounced by the average

reader—the salesmen disliked it and took to calling it “that book”; and the word had little or no connotation for the American public. We shifted it to *Flag of the Desert*, and, as flags are not likely to be carried in the American desert, we were able to get over a picture of the Sahara, camel raiders, and fighting tribesmen.

*Black Folk Tales* was another case of a story written to fit the title; and, in fact, sold on the title alone before it had been written.

No matter how excellent your title, you should not use it if it has been used before. This is not because of the copyright law, as, oddly enough, a title alone cannot be copyrighted. However, where well-known titles are concerned, there is always the possibility that misappropriation might be charged, and legal action could be taken on the grounds of unfair competition. The point authors and publishers must remember is that a confusion of titles means a confusion in the mind of the reader. It is well also to avoid titles which, while not duplicating those of other books, would come so close to them as to damage sales.

Chapter titles are less important than book titles, but it is well, in juveniles, to get into the practice of titling rather than just numbering your chapters; often out of the chapter title will emerge the name for your book. Sometimes the name is changed half a dozen times in the course of writing, and you write under what is known as a “working title,” since obviously the thing has to be called something. Sometimes you just give up, dump the burden in the editor’s arms, and say, “Here, name the baby.” But this is not to be recommended.



## *Turning Facts into Fiction*

RESEARCH is not a word to scare you. We know it sounds formidable, but all it really means, at least in juvenile fiction, is to look up the facts about a given time and place. Then, having mixed them with skill, imagination, and good sense, you turn them into fiction.

You see, after you've been writing a while, when you've begun to use up much of the material that comes within the scope of your own personal experience, you'll want to branch out and start along a new line. Or perhaps you already have some subject, not autobiographical, which interests you.

A notebook is the first requisite. Some writers believe in

card index files. Either is good. You can slip a few extra cards into your purse or pocket when you go to the library; blank sheets from a loose-leaf notebook, one of those that Woolworth stocks, are equally good. E.B. prefers the notebook because the sheets are larger and give her room to make a sketch of a costume, or to copy long passages. Notebooks with the letter index system are excellent. Once you get the notebook habit you'll want to keep one on the special subject on which you are working at the time, and another just for running notes which you'll collect for some future book.

For instance, there's the business of naming characters. Names differ in different countries, in different periods, and also right here in the United States in different localities. Some of our best names for characters were from an old volume of divorce proceedings dated early nineteenth century, which we came across in Atlanta, Georgia. Old grave-stones and yellowing newspapers of your special locality yield an excellent crop. Helping to measure gas masks in Devonshire, England, we noted another list of characteristic names and place names. Of course you can always resort to the phone book or the obituary columns, but a good character name is a treasure and isn't turned up every day.

After one season of foliage and flowers and bird life in an Adirondack cabin, we had gathered enough background material for several stories. Not just the flowers blooming during one particular week or month, but their scents and our emotional reactions to them (hardest of all to fake in cold blood), the smells of early morning, the squirrels' chatter and woodchucks' pace, the sounds that a whippoorwill makes at different phases of the moon, and different moons

of the season, and again one's own reactions to them. Later on you cannot recapture your reaction to the first frail Indian pipes found beneath wet beech leaves, nor always recall that fireweed, tall and rank, often grows where fire has passed. All these notes, of course, are fine practice, both in observation and in learning to put thoughts and feelings into words.

#### NOTES AND FILING

With research into the past, your notes and filing will become more complicated. One writer we know keeps a carefully indexed and cross-indexed file, showing where she got each scrap of information. Generally we do considerable reading on our chosen subject, as for the Egyptian and Cretan books, before we decide on the exact period in time. Once this has narrowed down, the notebook comes into play; indexing into religion and gods; temples; place names and a map; names both male and female. Costume takes another section; customs will be divided and subdivided. Each book dictates its own method of taking notes; for instance, in *Homespun* it was not necessary to make notes on temples and strange gods, but more space was needed for local sayings and quaint turns of speech and dialect.

#### READ TO ASSIMILATE

Don't try to memorize. The beginning writer is apt to overstuff his period narrative with too many and quite irrelevant details of local color, just because they are fascinating. He is by now keen on the period and the facts he has uncovered and he wants to talk about them. But he must learn to weed out; the final test is always, "Do they carry the story with them?"

Stop every now and then in your research and picture the scene. The authority whose book you are reading probably did not set his stage as a picture, nor risk his reputation as a savant by breathing life into his characters. Try out your own idea of what the place must have looked like; and how, had you been there, you would have felt and acted. Jot down this picture if you like, but leave it tentative, ready to be altered to meet new data as you unearth them from the grudging tome.

Your first picture will be all question marks. Was there a prevailing wind? Which way did the river run? How fast was it, and how deep at this time of year? Had horses been introduced by then, and, if so, what kind? What other beasts would there be? What difference in costume between different trades and guilds? But don't bother too much about the questions at this stage; just let them sensitize you, so that when the answers are reached, buried perhaps in small-type footnotes, they spring to your eye. Your subconscious can be taught to relieve your conscious mind of much of its detailed work.

Will the sun be shining? How will the flags (or are they pointed pennons) flap along the wall? What flowers will scent the air? What sounds will echo from the market place and the river? Soon whole chunks of your book will begin to come alive with pictures and emotions. In fact, you will find that you want to swing your plot one way or another, in order to show some particular picture that has appealed to you: the garden of the king, the temple steps, the dungeons beneath the castle wall.

Maybe this sounds as though it contradicts what we have said about not turning your book into a costume piece. But it is the digestion of the material, the making it come alive,

that is all the difference. If you can get right inside your characters well enough to see the scene through their eyes, there won't be the danger of your doing just a costume piece.

Another page of notes we'd suggest would be on the specific trades of the period; you'll want minor characters, each with a trade. Shoemakers or sandal-makers, weavers, goldsmiths—whatever crafts and trades abound in your chosen place and time. You wouldn't put a gold worker in Honolulu or in a pioneer American story; silver was almost unknown in ancient Crete. Weaving was a trade which we knew at first hand, so we chose to make it the center of one story, but even then we had the technical details checked by an expert before we released it.

Perhaps you have a special hobby about which you'd like to know the history. Why not write your story about that? Bees were one of our hobbies, and we used them to form the backbone of *Honey of the Nile*. For another book we had access to old diaries and old notebooks and yard books on shipbuilding; which woods were used and why, and where they came from. For the tale of clipper shipbuilding, one excellent and unexpected find was a group of books issued by the United States Government in 1917 on building modern wooden ships. It had been claimed that wooden shipbuilding was a lost art. Not a bit of it. Checking back with the old diaries, we found that even the language and the terms were the same, and the processes so similar that we were safe to use them.

Switching to the story of the early Erie Canal, we read a dozen books on the period; some were fiction, but most were very dry reports on the building. On reading these we re-

jected the original plan, which was to cover the entire building of the canal, as the period of time was too extended for a juvenile book and the characters would age too much in the time given. We collected maps (a good collection of gas station maps is a fine thing to have in the house; historical maps are still more valuable), and we hunted up people who had made the canal their hobby. These experts are nearly always very generous in their information, which is pretty accurate and more colorful than that just dug out of books. As it turned out, we used little of it in the final story, yet it gave us a background of authenticity from which we could write with conviction.

Sometimes you will find that it is not what you know, but what you don't know, that will dictate the course of your story. In a book of long ago, there are so many things you can't find out, or which discover themselves to you, maddeningly, only after the manuscript is in galley proof or on the bookstalls. So if you can't find the color of the horses in Roman times or have difficulty in naming the sails on Nelson's flagship, present that chapter, that picture, through the eyes of a character who also does not know or cannot find out. Or skip that point completely. We covered one such tricky gap by having our heroine feel so bad about it afterward that she couldn't bear to remember it, and merely touched lightly on the few points we were sure of.

Cynics have said that words are given to conceal our thoughts. A fiction writer must learn to adapt his writing to conceal legitimate ignorance on many subjects, both past and present. Long research combined with the most inspired guesswork still leaves blanks in the writer's knowledge, and the publisher's deadline looms closer. All right,

then, fall back on a main character who can reasonably be expected to share the writer's ignorance of technical terms and details, and tell that part of the story through his or her eyes and limited understanding. After all, you want to be a writer, not a research student.

#### RESEARCH PROPORTIONATE TO RESULTS

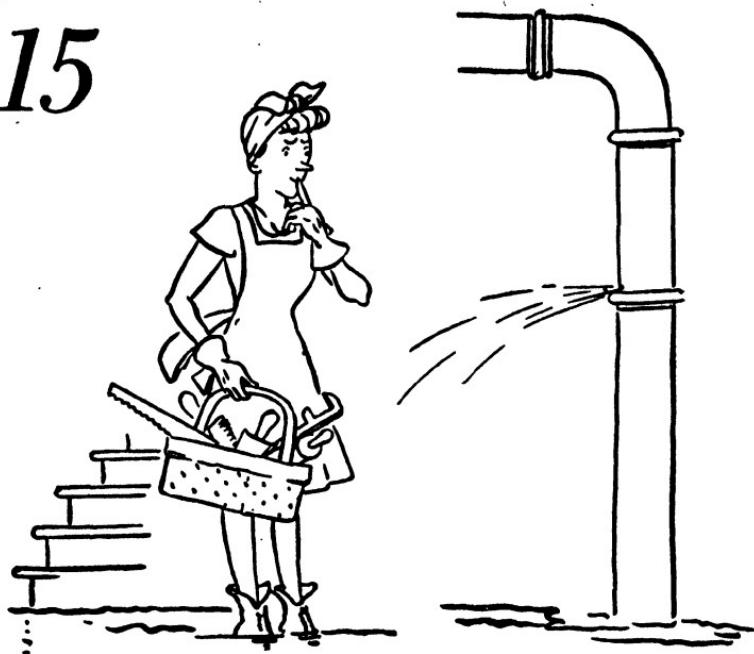
If the ink of scholarship runs in your veins, you will find it tempting to delve deeper into your subject than you should; to attempt to unearth some hitherto neglected source material and add your small contribution to the funds of scholarship. Your work, however, will seldom lie among manorial rolls and papyri. On occasion you may be lucky enough to unearth source material in the shape of a ledger, a log-book, or a diary belonging to your relatives. But in the main you will use the results of other people's scholarship. You will be reading up on your subject rather than undertaking research, within the scholarly meaning of the term.

The reasons are two, both simple commercial ones. You are being paid, or hope to be paid, as a fiction writer, not as a student. If you prove that one of the primeval giant lizards had an extra vertebra hitherto unknown, or if you think you have discovered a good reason for believing that Cleopatra was a man and not a woman, you are almost certain to want to dislocate your plot to include this astonishing piece of information. This is likely to spoil your story and cut down your sales. The second reason is the time which you can afford to spend upon each story. Though an established writer in the adult field may be able to spend as much as three years on each book, this would give you as a begin-

ner in the juvenile line an income of only a hundred to two hundred dollars a year. A juvenile writer must produce more books, and consequently spend less time on research.

Decide early whether you will be a research student or a writer, and stick to the decision.

# 15



## *The Tools You Work With* ✕

THOUGH it is no longer necessary to carve ideograms on granite nor turn adventure stories into bardic verse the better to remember them, presupposing a good tenor voice with harp accompaniment, writing is still a chore and a hard one.

This chapter tells of some well-tested tools which will take the strain off the wrist and sometimes off the brain. But let the tools be commensurate with the work you do. There are some writers, and more artists, who spend so much time in improving their equipment and in getting all set to start that there's no time left for writing or painting.

**TYPEWRITER**

It's hardly necessary to mention that, though many good books have been written in longhand, a typewriter saves you from writer's cramp, allows you to see more or less what the sentence will look like in print, makes the estimate of words more accurate, is essential for carbon copies, does not prevent later corrections in pencil, and, not least important, gives a fair-copy typist a reasonable hope of turning out good copy from your script. You cannot submit longhand copy to an editor.

If you are going to use a typewriter, make a job of it, learn the touch system, and get that over with at the start. Learn it early, learn it well. It won't take long and later you'll bless yourself for having done it.

Naturally we can't recommend any particular machine. If you travel a lot, even if it's only travel from room to room, get a portable. If you are lucky enough to possess that writer's dream, the peaceful little hideout at the top of the house, where you can go and shut the door and be quite uninterrupted by phone calls, household demands, or the desire to go out and do something else, then a full-size machine is more satisfactory. You can get one secondhand or rent it by the month.

If you make your own fair copies to submit to the editor, be sure that whatever machine you buy can turn out three clean carbons. Some of the best and most costly portables won't do this, even when pampered with a silk ribbon and special carbon papers, because the typeface strikes a glancing blow.

Take good care of your machine. Keep it covered when not in use, not only to exclude dust but to keep the ribbon

from drying out and the oil in the bearings from turning gummy. This, after the first pride in a new machine has died down, is difficult. But you can make a smart cover of gay oilcloth that is easy to set in place, or get someone to make you one for Christmas.

#### PAPER

Use a standard size. You must anyway, for final copy, so you might as well start with it. We use a buff manila, at less than fifty cents a ream, for first draft, refusing to allow ourselves such indulgence as "we can't think on the beastly stuff, it's so depressing." And for convenience' sake, we prefer a cheap blue or green paper for all preliminary notes, thus keeping notes, draft, and final copy all nicely distinct on the desk top. When we have been juggling a novel, an article, and a serial, and traveling round Europe at the same time, the use of different colored papers has saved both time and temper.

And for the final submission to editors, use white paper, of course, of medium weight and fair quality. Superfine paper will neither get a poor story accepted nor procure a better contract for a good one. On the other hand, poor quality paper is false economy; if the script should be forced to go the round of several publishers, it will get badly tattered and involve you in more cost for retyping.

#### RIBBONS

Plain or silk to suit your machine or pocket. Buy all black, of course, to spare the poor editor's eyes. For the same reason, don't keep on using the same ribbon until, despite your hammering, it produces a result almost too faint to read. And here's an economy tip. Ribbons dry up

long before they are worn out or have shed their ink. This is particularly true in a hot city apartment. Don't throw them away when they are too faint. Instead, put a fine drop of sewing machine oil, typewriter oil, or any other oil that is thin enough, on every six inches or so of the ribbon as you reel it off to one side. Then fold it in the tin-foil paper and put it away in a tin for a few months. When you bring it out again, use it first for a few personal letters, or plot notes, until it inks evenly. It will not erase well, but its second life will be longer than its first. And ribbons make quite an item on the professional writer's annual expense account.

#### SUNDRIES

Use carbon paper freely, even in your first draft. It is just as easy to work that way and saves considerable anxiety if you have a spare copy when you mail off half a year's work to your copyist. There seems no successful way to revive carbon paper. The only economy tip is to borrow that of your collaborator.

Pencils—have plenty of them—medium or even softer—for making notes and interlining your drafts. For comfortable working there should be a surplus of both pencils and erasers over the amount your collaborator can borrow or lose. If, on the other hand you prefer to be the borrower, make sure that your collaborator buys enough. Be kind, but firm.

Pins. Don't use them. Most editors prefer a straightforward attack with stiletto or gun. The poisoned pin approach is rightly deemed unsporting.

Paper clips are convenient for keeping chapters separate in your rough draft. They are permissible, too, for keeping a short article in tidy order, but don't use them, or pins, or

paper fasteners, on bulkier manuscripts. A novel should reach the editor as a smooth stack of paper, cleanly typed, with the minimum of alterations, packed between two sheets of stout cardboard, and then done up in a sensible brown-paper parcel. No colored ribbons, no fancy folders, and the most matter-of-fact covering letter.

One of our favorite editors interjects here: Don't write a long accompanying letter saying how you have tried out this story on all your little nieces and nephews, on your six grandchildren and their little friends, and how they liked it. It may well be true, but makes your editor grit her teeth and dare you to amuse her. Don't write asking for an appointment before she has even had time to read your manuscript; if she likes it she will send for you. Two weeks to a month is the normal time to consider a manuscript; after that you might drop a gentle note of inquiry. Don't submit illustrations with the manuscript unless it's primarily a picture book and the pictures are part of the job. Illustrating is a very technical matter, and it is seldom that the amateur can produce a drawing that will fit the editor's needs as to size, shape, manner of execution, and ease of reproduction.

In addition she says, "Please tell them to keep a duplicate of the manuscript. Please tell them to submit name and address with the manuscript and send stamps for the return of same. Or suggest that it be returned express collect."

Oil. The kind you buy from the makers of your typewriter does not gum. The kind you buy at the corner hardware store may do so. A feather or a pipe cleaner is handy for putting the smallest possible drop exactly where it is needed. A water-color brush is even better but is a nuisance to keep for months until next needed and too costly to use a fresh one each time.

**Table.** Don't pamper yourself. Learn to write on an up-ended suitcase on shipboard, on a corner of the dining table, on your knee, just anywhere. But where you have long hours to put in, make a note of the height of the chair and desk and the general posture of any office secretary. Try working in exactly the same position each day and then try dragging your work all over the house. Whichever gives you results is right—until the next time.

#### WORK ROUTINE

Office hours are not strictly a tool, but at least are a method to cajole, trick, or bully the subconscious into delivering the goods. Some writers clock in and out like a one-man office staff; eat, exercise, sleep, and start again. Some racket around all day and write and drink coffee all night, or seem to. Neither the clocked routinist nor the coffee-and-inspirationist can understand how the other fellow gets any results. Maybe the routinist hides a golf putter in his downtown office to while away his dullest hours; maybe the inspirationist sometimes puts in a hard eight hours of plugging. Anyway, among the best-sellers, there are practitioners of both methods. Though there are still more who, when the work goes well and so-called inspiration is flowing, will carry on until they can barely hit the keys, and at other times grimly go on hitting for an appointed number of hours in the hope that some of the stuff will be usable.

The average writer starts the trade as an avocation and when his day's work is ended. Perhaps he looks forward to the time when he can throw up his present job and have all day and every day in which to write. And a simple multiplication sum tells him what his output would then be and suggests a grand income. But for the writer of juveniles alone,

this is close to impossible. We know personally no writer of juveniles who has become rich, or who has been able even to make a living, on juveniles alone. Quite often the juvenile writer will outgrow his group, the age for which he writes. Starting with a story for the very young he gradually works upward, his ideas grow, his style becomes more mature, he has more things and older ideas which he wishes to put over. And in the end the editor's letter will say, "Sorry. I enjoyed this, but it's too old for a juvenile. Better try an adult novel"—if there isn't a novel already brewing on the typewriter.

Five hours of hard struggle per day appears to be the limit for the ordinary writer. At least it is ours, as a rule. Of course, this may be extended through mechanical tasks, like retyping, checking references, correcting copy, to a pretty full day. And most writers have phones to answer, meals to prepare and cook, trains to meet, firewood to cut, and all the other chores of existence which keep him or her, despite themselves, sane and reasonably healthy. Don't feel that living is a waste of time. It gives you material to write about!

There is probably only one work rule worth observing all the time and that is not to wait for "inspiration" but to do your best to train it to come when called. In other words, do just as you would in any other trade or profession.

#### REFERENCE BOOKS

If you live in a town, learn to use the public libraries freely and to the best advantage. By "to the best advantage," we mean without wasting time either through not learning the routine of references, or through being tempted away from the point you have gone to verify, into pleasant byways of knowledge. If you live in the country and are not limited for space, as you would be in an apartment, you can save

time on visits to town by accumulating a shelf or two of reference books. Though a writer should learn at first hand from living people and real life, he will often be forced to supplement this by the judicious use of other people's factual writings. Factual, not fiction, preferably. And the trick is to read widely and assimilate, rather than learn as from a school textbook. And it is more fun too.

Your shelf of reference books should be allowed to grow and should not be bought too speculatively ahead of your actual needs, as this type of book is expensive. It should happen this way. A few mornings in the public library have shown you that you are using only two books. The other twenty or so on the same subject don't quite fit the place or period of the story you are planning. It dawns on you that the price of the books is less than the amount you are spending on rail or bus fares and lunches to keep on consulting them in the library, quite apart from your time, which also costs money. You order copies, and your private reference library has begun to grow.

Your reference library on special subjects will need the backing of a more general reference book. Something which will give you just a scrap of information on any subject and not a full background. The public library is your best bet if you live near enough. If not, find out which one of your friends is lucky enough to own the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. It is as American as it is English. George Washington owned the third edition. Despite its size—its twenty-four volumes weigh nearly one hundred pounds—it has to compress its information on any one subject into very few words and is therefore not as detailed as your specialized reference books. It is not easy to assimilate, but it is perfect for giving a brief summary when you can't afford the time

to delve into specialized reference books at the public library.

Of the many dictionaries compiled, only two appear to be acceptable authorities to publishers—Webster in America and Oxford in Great Britain. You will use the dictionary, not to discover a strikingly rare word, but to make sure that the word you want to use has exactly the meaning which you hope it has. The bigger the dictionary the more time you will need to spend on the search, and the less handy it is to carry around on your travels. The Concise Oxford on India paper, and a medium-sized Webster, meet our needs.

Roget's *Thesaurus* is nearly as essential as a dictionary. Its main use is to remind you of the word which is on the tip of your tongue but which you can't for the life of you produce. It's a common everyday word and exactly fits the sentence. But don't strain after the word, wasting time and reducing your valuable self-confidence; just slip in a dummy word which is nearly but not quite the one you want and mark your manuscript in the margin. If the word hasn't come to you when you've finished writing for the morning or afternoon, look up the nearly-but-not-quite-word in the *Thesaurus*, and you'll find the one you wanted sitting snugly beside it. Good old Roget, the weary writer's friend!

*Modern English Usage*, by Fowler, will come into your life some day. It is authoritative, it is amusing, it is portable (particularly in the India-paper edition).

If you still have some money to spend, look through a secondhand bookstall for something which deals with the origins and meanings of words. Without forcing the pace and so giving yourself a distaste for the subject, lead yourself gently on to cultivate a special interest in words and phrases. These are the raw materials of your new trade, and

if you are to be a craftsman you must develop an interest in, and an affection for, the different kinds of stuff you work with.

#### READING WITH A PENCIL

Do this, but preferably not in books from the public library. Get into the habit of reading with a critical eye, and also with an appreciative eye. If you like a story, even a short story in a magazine, go over it and see how the other fellow achieved his effect. How did he get over that pert bit of dialogue? How did he get the effect of personality in his characters, in his ending? We have, on our own shelves, any number of books, mostly popular fiction, which bear pencil marks opposite favorite paragraphs; and on the end sheets, an analysis of chapter endings and how they were achieved. If you have a pet author, let him teach you; the tuition is free and he is always at hand.

#### LITERARY AGENTS

We hope they won't mind being classed as tools. We have both, from time to time, used an author's agent, but not for juveniles. This is because we have been on the spot in New York and lucky enough to know most of the markets at first hand and most of the juvenile editors at least by sight. The juvenile market is not a wide one. Possibly not more than thirty-five publishing houses have special children's editors. Some firms buy only four or five juveniles a year, others twenty to thirty. The short story and serial market is also very limited; as a rule the prices are not sufficiently high to tempt agents to bother with them, the rake-off of ten per cent being so small as scarcely to cover postage. Sometimes an agent does not want to bother with a beginning writer,

but you may find one who is receptive. At one time we should have said: "Beware the agent who charges a fee for reading before he has placed your work," but this practice is now followed by a number of highly reputable agents and, in view of the time spent on new writers before their production brings in a financial return, there may be sound justification for it.

You can, with juvenile writing, get along pretty well without any go-between. Look over the books in the children's room of your nearest library. See which publishers specialize in publishing for children. Look up their addresses in a good reference work, which your library can furnish you, or in one of the writers' magazines. It is not necessary to know the name of the juvenile editor; just address your package to the juvenile department of the publisher you pick out. Then when it returns to you, pick out the second choice on your list. And so on down to the end.

But for adult work an agent is almost essential. He can, in addition to placing your book manuscript, suggest markets for first and second serial rights, possible movie markets, competitions, collections for textbooks and readers. A good agent keeps track of the market; it is a job in itself and you can't hope to do that. Also he cushions the shock of the first shower of rejection slips. A good agent is strictly reliable and honest; he has to be, it's his stock-in-trade.

#### **CRITICS**

He is a tool you should learn to use—a tool which costs you nothing. If you are writing at all, you want to sell what you write. You cannot afford to set aside criticism with the defense reaction "Oh, my stuff is too good, or too full of fantasy," or too something else, for general appreciation. If

you have a story to tell, or a point to make, it is important to consider reader reaction and find out if you've really got it over.

As a critic a friend, a non-writing friend, isn't much help. Even though he may like your story he will strain to find something to object to, with the feeling that this will be of help; and such unnatural reaction is no guide. If you take your story to a writer you may get a more constructive criticism; but no other writer would work out the tale precisely along your line, so even his suggestions may be confusing. And though the trained writer can see below the skin of the story to the skeleton beneath and can be constructive in the way a non-writer can't be, his reactions are not those of that portion of the public which you hope will plunk down two dollars for your book.

The best criticism, taken all around, will come to you from those patient souls who read for publishers and for agents; they bridge the gap between the general public and the professional writer. Also, they have an eye to sales; they will read your book with one eye on recent successes and the other eye on supposed taboos—religious, racial, educational, and so on.

Sometimes such criticisms are frankly valueless; such as one comment we had from an untraveled publishers' reader: "This is not my idea of Africa." It was as pointless as though a South Sea Islander had said, "Your buildings in New York can't be four stories high. Palm stems don't grow long enough."

The point is not to take all such comments at their surface value. "Cut out the long descriptions of different types of weapons," was one reader's comment. It showed that the writer had not succeeded in making his point that the

weapons were a necessary part of the story. Rewritten, though not cut out, the long paragraph was stronger and passed next time without comment. Reading behind the criticism, the writer had found, "Make us understand why these weapons were so important, make us feel their importance."

If the readers for publishers and agents were able to tell you precisely what is wrong with your book they would be writers, not readers. It is seldom that they can do more than tell you their own reactions, though they are skillful enough to make these seem objective, not subjective, criticisms. Thus a group of suggestions, seemingly unconnected, will tie together into "too gory" for the reader's taste. Or "too depressing during the present state of international affairs," or even "give us a happier ending."

As the professional reader and critic tries to understand your book, so also must you try to use, and not merely accept crossly, the reader's criticism.

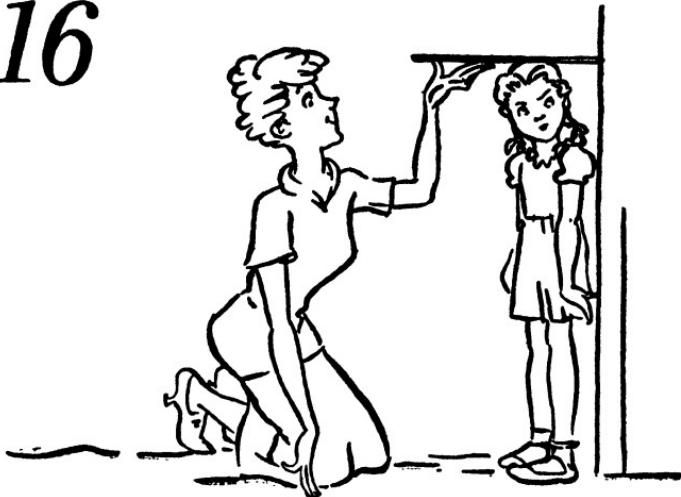
#### ECONOMY

In all these suggestions we have assumed that economy is important. You are perhaps at this moment about to begin to write your book. It will be anything from ten to twenty-four months before the money starts to come in. And in the meantime you must continue to have bread and butter and a bit of jam. When your book is finished, after some months, and has found its publisher, you will, fortunately, be able to get a check for an advance royalty. Sometimes this is not paid until publication date, but usually it comes when the contract is signed. The sum ranges from one to five hundred dollars, depending on the price and sales chances of your book, book club prospects, and

numerous other factors. Do not, if you can help it, sell your book outright; a royalty arrangement is much more advantageous. Occasionally the outright sale is proposed to a new writer, but it is usually not fair to the author.

If you keep down incidental expenses you will not need to make yourself unpopular with editors by pestering them for big advances. And this will mean that you will have larger royalty checks trickling in to support you as you write your next book. Gradually these royalties from an increasing number of books will begin to form a small but steady income. Even so, you will still be in the position of having to pay cash for food, rents, paper, and stamps, although you yourself get paid a year or so in arrears. So let the tools of your trade be really essential and professional tools, and not the luxurious toys of the rich amateur.

# 16



## *The Class System* ✓

### CLASSIFICATION BY AGE OF READER

CHILDREN's books fall naturally into age groups. Many librarians, and many editors too, dislike these age divisions, and quite correctly, since there is no easy or certain way to determine the mental age of the young reader.

Still, for the purpose of finding out where your manuscript will fit into the children's book lists, you must have some rough idea of the age groups and their differing needs. It is obvious that there is a wide age difference between the pre-school picture book, with no writing at all or only a brief line of description of the picture, and, at the other end of the scale, the junior novel with a slight love interest for the junior high or high school reader.

Also, for the sake of the prospective purchaser, whether he is the buying department of a bookstore, the head of a children's library, or the parent who "wants a book for a little girl of seven who has a pet lamb" or "a boy of twelve who likes to read about treasure islands," there must be some arbitrary age limit attached to the book.

Frequently the first book a writer produces will be determined by the age of some young reader whom he has in mind. This writing for the amusement of a definite reader will bring the story within a definite age group and is far more likely to make it all of a piece than any elaborate specification we could suggest.

#### CLASSIFICATION BY NATURE OF BOOK

There is also another series of divisions, into one of which your story will probably fit. Just as adult books divide into light fiction, the historical novel, the problem novel, and so on along the scale all the way to the heavy scientific tome, so the juvenile book will probably fall into one of the following classifications, which are possibly a little more clearly defined for juvenile books than for adult reading.

#### PICTURE BOOKS

These are for the very young and are generally planned either by an artist or a photographer. If the book has any text, it is seldom more than a short running comment on the pictures, which should be clear enough for the child to follow by himself. Outstanding among these are the various ABC books. One of the clearest and most popular is C. B. Falls', but there are many others.

### STRAIGHT FICTION

Among juveniles, as among adults, straight fiction is read purely for amusement and makes no pretense of instruction. Among these are countless mystery and adventure stories.

### ANIMAL STORIES

Overlapping fiction with fantasy, yet not too fantastic, are the animal tales: *Black Beauty* and *Moorland Mousie*, straight animal tales, told in the first person; *Bob, Son of Battle*, *The Call of the Wild*, and others. And verging more into fantasy are those of semi-human animals, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, and *The House at Pooh Corner*.

### PURE FANTASY

Into this class fall the fairy tales, those of Lewis Carroll and Eleanore Farjeon, and the *Mary Poppins* books.

### HISTORICAL ADVENTURE

This overlaps fiction in another direction. Some such stories are based on actual people—*O'Donnell of Destiny*, *Ben and Me*, and *Master Skylark*. Others, like *Calico Bush* and *The Trumpeter of Krakow*, use merely a historical background for fiction characters. We have, between us, written many such books. Of this class are also *Puck of Pook's Hill*, *Turi of the Magic Fingers*, and *The Splendid Spur*.

### VOCATIONAL ADVENTURE

As its name implies, this is a tale in which the hero or heroine makes good in some modern field, as we had

planned in our modern Jack and the Beanstalk. Of this class are *Penny March*; *Sue Barton, Visiting Nurse*; *Careers of Cynthia*, and *Blue Jacket*. Lately there has been a wave of these books, on nursing, reporting, flying, editing, selling, dancing, and, in fact, on almost every career that an author could think of and on which he could write with authority. There seems however, to be room for more; the vocational books soon go out of date and new vocations are always being born.

#### CAREER BOOKS

Just as historical-adventure and historical-fiction shade into pure history, the vocational career stories shade off into books, written by experts with factual material, that carry serious advice about one vocation, or on how to choose a vocation. Among these are *Careers Ahead* and *Careers in the Making*.

#### HOBBY BOOKS

Akin to the career books are the hobby books and the play books. There are books on all types of recreation, on baseball, on football, on skating, on, in fact, every possible game, indoors and out. There are also the fictionized athletic stories as written by Ralph Henry Barbour; the fictionized hobby books (which sometimes overlap the career books) such as *Strings to Adventure* and *Children of the Handicrafts*; and the more specialized factual books on *How to Ride Your Hobby*, the many excellent books on the making of marionettes, airplanes, model ships, and so on. There are specially written plays for marionettes and for children themselves. There is a group of books on games, and a group of books on songs and singing for

children.) And we also have tried our hand at fictionized music, with *Penny Whistle* and *One String Fiddle*.

### SCIENCE BOOKS

Science is another line that is wide open for the new writer with a specialized background. Either pure science, simplified for the young reader—*Splitting the Atom*, *Yourself and Your Body*, *The Stars for Sam*, *The Earth for Sam*, *And That's Why*. Or natural history—*Exploring with Beebe*, *Animals Looking at You*, *Termite City*, *Animals in the Sun*, *The Jawbreaker Alphabet*. Or fictionized natural history—*Hide and Go Seek*.

### GEOGRAPHICAL-FICTION AND TRAVEL-ADVENTURE

There are straight travel books as well as fictionized travel—*Roving All the Day*, *Magic Portholes*, *Nancy Sails*. And also the fiction story with an authentic foreign background that is not strictly travel, such as *Three Tunes for a Flute*, which has a kernel of mystery as well as a foreign scene, and *Hans Brinker*. There are, of course, many Indian stories and cowboy stories—those by Will James, and *Dancing Cloud*, *Chi Wee*, *Carlo*, and many others.

### STRAIGHT FACTUAL

Straight factual books are suitable for children of almost any age; those written and illustrated by the Petershams are particularly good, also *Make Way for the Mail* and *Steam Shovels*. These must be accurate and up-to-date, well illustrated, and presented in a style that appeals to the young reader.

**BIOGRAPHICAL**

Among the biographical books for young people there is a wide range, from *Young Walter Scott* and *Boy Shelley*, which are straight biography, to *Invincible Louisa*, which is fictionized.

**FANTASY**

Several different classes of stories, from fairy tales to animal stories, fall within the classification of fantasy. If the belief of anthropologists is correct, that fairies are survivals of old-time religious beliefs, or even a traditional picture, in other instances, of earlier races displaced by the conquerors, then the early fairy story was not fantasy but legend. That is, unless one is willing to class as fantasy all other religious beliefs and all other histories which have become embellished and distorted through mouth-to-ear transmission down the centuries.

But the fairy story of today is definitely synthetic, artificial, concocted by people who do not pretend to be writing truth or history. This makes it outright fiction, even though it often follows the pattern of earlier tradition. And since some of its characters escape from within the bounds of what human experience leads the reader to believe is real life, it is fantastic fiction, or fantasy.

It seems clear that in many animal tales, where, for instance, the Cheshire cat appears and dissolves into space at will, or in the thousands of stories where animals speak, behave, and are even dressed, like humans, we have fantasy. Not all animal tales are fantasy, of course. There are many border cases where the animal behaves like a real

one but has motives and thoughts attributed to him which we can suspect of being unduly human.

### THIS FAIRY-TALE STUFF

Beware of tackling fantasy before you have learned to handle fact. The wastebaskets of all editors are filled, the return mails overloaded, with fairy tales that have failed to make the grade and are wafted home on the wings of rejection slips. There's a pretty bit of fantasy for you! But based, we assure you, on solid fact. And even then quite a number slip past the unwary editor as sure as the spring and fall lists roll round, only to die a slow death on the jobbers' shelves.

Fantasy based on reality is another thing. Note in the stories of Kipling how vitally real is his Puck; not, as Puck himself scornfully remarks, one of those "little buzzflies with butterfly wings and gauze petticoats and a wand." Read on to the next paragraph in that story (it's "Weland's Sword") and see how he builds Sir Huon into reality. How real, and how naughty too at times, is Mowgli! Hitty, in *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*, has become a character not because she was a doll, but because of her human reactions. The creatures of Lewis Carroll are as much flesh and blood as your next door neighbor; the cross schoolmaster, Humpty Dumpty, the muzzy-minded White Queen, will remain real characters as long as people continue to be schoolmastery or muzzy-minded. But dream stuff is dangerous material for the beginning. We are not all Lewis Carrolls to hit it the first time, and perhaps the reason his *Sylvie and Bruno* is forgotten is because it lacks that humanness so solidly right in the stories of Alice.

Learn first to depict the people around you. Then you

can play with them in fantasy. It is never the fairy who is not real, but the writer, the historian, who is not quite sure of the fairy's reality and so is unable to make the creature convincing.

#### FOR THE VERY YOUNG

We had to dismiss picture books very briefly in order to get on with showing the general classification. Now we can go back to them.

Books for kindergarten and pre-school age are in a class completely apart from most of what we have been telling you. For that reason most early age books are born, not made; and many of them are from one-book authors.

The young child cannot follow even the most simple plot complication. Nor can his mind, at four and six, follow an abstract problem or a story about something that is sharply apart from himself. The main need is to keep the story and picture material within the limit of the child's own experience. At first the objects in the story and the character's relation to them must be something that has already roused the child's interest. *His bed, his ball, his window, his bath, his toy dog*—all tied together with a pattern or repetition that is simple and intelligible. Gradually, as his field widens, he can take in more and more that is new to him.

The repetitive pattern of the very young story, and even up to the seven-year-old story, grows out of two or three needs. Since the very young child cannot follow a story that wanders too far from the subject, it is necessary to repeat the subject frequently. If it is repeated to a pattern, so much the better; the child, unlike the adult, is not bored with repetition, but actually looks forward to it and

enjoys his recognition of the pattern. The pattern acts as a series of milestones in the story, each repetition being an advance over the last.

Many of the Mother Goose nursery rhymes, though originally written as political songs and satires to be sung in the streets, have survived as children's songs simply because of the rhythm and repetition, which were designed to catch the memory and humor of an unlettered peasant folk. Some of them are now outmoded for very young children simply because the very young child no longer has any contact with the background of the characters. How long will it be before children reading the story of Jack and Jill will have to ask, "Mother, why did Jack and Jill go outdoors to get a pail of water? Hadn't they any running water in the house?" Even kings are being relegated more and more to fairy tales, and so far no dictator nursery rhymes have emerged to replace them. So, the smaller the child, the more present and immediate and to hand must be the content of the story. He can see a toy baby panda in his room, but he cannot picture a real baby panda in some place called "China," since if the word has any meaning for him at all, it will vaguely mean the bowl he eats from. If it is a story about his toy panda, so much the better; *his* relation to *his* panda; the less plot, the better, since the very construction of a plot has to carry with it some future and some past. To the young child the present and familiar is still exciting adventure.

The child loves to recognize. He reads pictures through his own experience, he listens to recurring words with the same pleasure in recognition. Even up to eight years old this repetition of words can be used with effect, and in adult fiction it still occurs. The average young reader pre-

fers a happy ending to a surprise ending. Unless it, too, is happy.

All pre-school-age books depend largely on pictures for their interest. For this reason most of the books for very little children are designed by the illustrator rather than by the writer, though the two in one person, or the two in collaboration, achieve a very good effect. The pictures must be clear and plain and simple, not too modern or fantastic in treatment, with as much of the story as possible in each. They should contain no giant hands or legs of adults half offstage to confuse the small observer; clear bright colors, and not too many of them. This last because of the difficulties and expense of reproduction. The tendency in books for very young children is, at the moment, toward the realistic.

~~books~~ A young child's impressions come through his five senses, and he has not yet built up an association of ideas through memory, he likes stories about things he can touch, taste, handle, and hear. But mostly he likes stories about movement, about busses, trains, boats, engines—if he has traveled on them. Airplanes interest a slightly older group. Running reminds the child of a pleasant sensation, so that stories about things which run, and runaways, are always good, even up to eight-year-olds. Emma Brock's runaway stories all contain this basic idea; the runaway sardine, the goat that ran away, the cheese that escaped. Their rather bright background appeals to the five- or six-year-old, their very accurate foreign setting is just right for the school-age child.

The grouping of juveniles which we have used in this chapter is not a scientific classification. You may prefer to evolve another system. Try then, before you start to

write, to see your book as a whole; at least with sufficient clarity to decide into which class it will fall. It may bridge two or more of the working classifications we have shown, as these have no hard and fast boundaries. But decide what its main characteristic is.

It may sound too obvious to be worth stating, but in writing, as in travel, you stand a much better chance of reaching your destination if you know where you're going when you start. Then you won't be in danger of starting one kind of book and finishing off with another, totally different.



## *Office Hours X*

YOUR method of work will depend on the type of book you intend to produce. If it's a short, very young child's book, you may do most of your work by telling the story verbally to a succession of children. You are likely to get grand cadence and timing this way, a nice stream of smoothly running sound which at the same time produces very adequate pictures in the young mind. At the other end of the scale is the manufacturer of adult fiction, who keeps strict office hours, speaks into a dictograph or dictates to a secretary. So many words per hour, so many hours per day. Somewhere within this bracket your method will lie.

We ourselves are all for writing directly on the type-

writer. The method gives a standard wordage per page, looks more like the finished product than if written in pen or pencil, can give you spare copies, and is much easier to read and correct.

There's a lot to be said for office hours. They train your subconscious in well-grooved routine and can save your having to crack the whip at yourself. If, when you sit down to a certain table, at a certain hour of the day, your hand goes out to yesterday's typing, your eye falls automatically on the first line of the first page, and your critical faculty starts revising before you really know that you've started that dreadful thing called "work," you'll have saved an expenditure of energy upon will power.

By the time you've realized that you've started the morning's labors, you'll be nicely conditioned to it. The people whom you ought to ring up about tomorrow's engagements, the need to go down to the bank and draw out a little money, the desire to speak to your next-door neighbor, will be fleeting twinges, nothing really to disturb you.

In revising the typescript you will get yourself back into the time and place of your story. And you may even find that some bits of your writing are definitely encouraging, where you know darned well you've actually said what you've wanted to say; or your character has. And in almost the right words, too.

Well then, nicely in the mood, the seat of the chair not yet beginning to grow hard, you look over your plot notes of the day's chapter. And in your mind are already some ideas carried over from yesterday. You slip your yellow paper into the typewriter with a carbon sheet, because when you send the finished copy to your clear-copy typist,

you won't want to risk your little all in one railway express company basket.

And now we're up against two classes of writers. We hate to overuse the terms, but nothing so accurately describes one class as "those who love to write." We don't know that anything can be done for them. They're going to write anyway, come hell or high water. It's extremely improbable that they will ever patiently work out a plot and character notes, but they don't worry us in the least. They will write the book through with the greatest of happiness and self-confidence, rewrite it again without annoyance from start to finish, and perhaps a third time without boredom. They won't suffer; writing is a perfect outlet for them, the supreme release from daily cares and problems. It is worth their while to write even if the manuscripts never find a publisher.

On the other extreme is the writer who, protesting violently, has to be dragged to his table by his wife. We don't know what happens to this class when they're not married; presumably they don't write but do something useful instead. This class is rather a problem; they wriggle out of their chairs to go and fetch a pipe or matches, to let the dog in or out, to get a new package of cigarettes, then remember suddenly that they've got to call a man about the car. Except from the viewpoint of writing, this type of writer, when seated before his blank page, is one of the most efficient of mortals; he remembers everything, adopts a most responsible attitude to his duties as a citizen, as a letter writer, as a parent, as a runner of errands, as a pruner of rosebushes. In fact, the amount of energy and imagination expended in finding excuses would just about write the book.

(It is extremely difficult to set down rules for methods of writing; writers are as varied as the characters which they create.) Yet, if you are a person not overconfident about your ability, you may dislike your work and need a habit-building method to get you down to it. You can take the time method, clocking in at a certain hour each morning or each afternoon. Or you can use the routine method, which leads from breakfast coffee to after-breakfast cigarette, through the very minimum of duties, and you must insist on its being the minimum, to the chair, the table, and the first sheet of paper, which has to be filled with written thoughts of some kind.

(No two writers that we know have the same method of converting delicate physiological processes inside the skull into marks on paper that can, in due course, be exchanged for food and other necessities. Our method is only one of many thousands, and by no rules of chance is it likely to be the best. But here it is, for what it is worth.)

Generally we start with the title. It may be merely a working title, but there has to be something by which we can refer to the book. We have discussed the story and already have an idea for several of the big scenes around which the plot has begun to curl itself. We then begin to get our characters—a list of these, with, on separate pages, a description of each—and to fit them into the scenes. This almost immediately means a revision of plot; one extra character has of himself suggested a corking good scene too good to be discarded.

If the book is historical there will be of necessity certain scenes which must be played on our stage. For instance, in *Honey of the Nile* we had to use the crowning of the king in the Temple of Amen Ra; we also had to use his death,

and later his burial, these being such important parts of Egyptian ceremonial life. Certain other scenes suggested themselves as valuable to the progress of the plot. These were jotted down on a new sheet of paper and began to group themselves in chronological order; beside each we suggested about where in the book, about which chapter, they would come. This is still very loose and leaves room for other chapters to slip in, or for a regrouping later.

Now, having our characters and knowing where our story must open, we discuss Chapter One. What characters should be on the stage when the curtain goes up? Start with just one, if we can. All right . . . and the outline of that chapter begins to form. It is typed on a blue paper kept especially for outlines, and in the present tense, like stage directions. Just the action that takes place in that chapter. The big advantage of this method—and we are rather keen on it ourselves—is that there is no time nor space nor necessity for fancy writing. No dialogue, no moods or emotions indulged in, aside from the mere mention of them. It is all cold fact.

This method is pursued for about three chapters, taking up from one to six pages each, in order to have something to begin on. It is unwise to plan further ahead than this, more than the bare backbone of the book, since characters change during the course of the story; it is best to allow leeway for such changes.

With the first blue page before us, we begin to write. No need now to change our chapter outline, we can write as fully as we please. It is no longer a matter of what is to be done. It is *how* it is to be done.

For our own personal collaboration we have worked out a system of alternate typewriters. H.B. types out the blue

plan, with both of us discussing it. E.B. then takes over for the first draft, on yellow paper (the change to yellow means that our drafts don't get hopelessly mislaid among a drift of all-one-color sheets). H.B. dictates, E.B. takes it down, but rewrites even as she takes it down, reforming the sentences, sometimes asking for a moment's leeway to get in a pert and pertinent bit of dialogue or description. One of us is best on characters, the other best on descriptions; one often pauses while the other carries on alone. Six pages a day, for a five- to six-hour working day, is good going. It has run as high as fourteen pages, as low as one. But these extremes are rare.

After the first two chapters are written in full, the outline of Chapter Three on blue paper may need to be revised, perhaps to bring in a new character, perhaps Chapter Two has somewhat changed the outline. Or we may pause to draft Chapters Four and Five before yellow-writing Chapter Three, or even to take out the loose scale of chapters and insert another tentative scene that has suggested itself.

Before starting a new morning's work we reread yesterday's, discuss it, but don't spend too long in revamping. That will come later. It is seldom, now that we have so many books behind us, that we need to revamp a chapter completely, although once in a while a whole third of a book has to go into the scrap basket because it just hasn't hit the stride we want.

When the yellow manuscript is complete, generally after a month or two of research and six to ten weeks of writing, H.B. (not having read it clear through, nor seen all of E.B.'s additions) reads it, revises, then returns it to E.B. for revisions. After we have consulted again, it is ready for

the fair copy to be made. Then, reading together, we interpolate, punctuate, and check for spelling. By this time it is quite impossible to tell which of us wrote the book. However, if from the first it was planned to come out as a Herbert Best book, it has, for some unknown reason, taken on the stamp of his style and personality. If it was to be an Erick Berry, it turns out to be quite different. We don't know how that's done. It is one of those mysteries of writing.



## *The Donkey and the Camel, Or Suggestions on Collaboration*

IT IS NOT AT ALL NECESSARY THAT THE BRAINS OF TWO COLLABORATORS TO WORK TOGETHER SHOULD FUNCTION ALONG THE SAME LINES. IN FACT, ONCE THEY HAVE STOPPED TRYING TO CONVERT EACH OTHER, WITH ARGUMENTS WHICH WASTE TIME AND BREAK EACH OTHER'S TRAIN OF THOUGHT, THEIR DIFFERENCES ARE OF VALUE. FOR WHAT ONE CAN'T DO, THE OTHER PERHAPS CAN.

You may marry your collaborator. It is quite convenient. But you must make one unbreakable rule, which is to set aside all matrimonial disputes or other personal conflicts the minute you get down to writing. If you can, set aside even your ruffled thoughts. If you can treat the writing room or the writing table as a sanctuary where each of you

is safe from the other's absurd ill humor and unreason, you may come to welcome the chance to get down to work. And when you have done a decent morning's toil together you may be reluctant to take up the dispute where you left off.

This does not mean that you will be free from disputes when writing; but let them be impersonal disputes on writing; and don't keep on with the same arguments. Learn from experience.

Whether married or unmarried, whether of the same sex or different sexes, go to a few movies and plays together; read, occasionally, the book the other fellow reads. And start the custom of analyzing what you see and read for the sake of the tricks of the trade which you can discover.

Together you will note that, when the movie director changes the angle from which the camera photographs a scene he does it with a reason. You notice that when he changes camera angle too often the scene is tiring to follow, the eye and the mind having to make too many adjustments. And where he has too long a sequence without a break of camera angle, the spectators rustle and fidget and cough, all of which minor noises subside as soon as the camera angle changes.

In Chapter Five we've told you what we make of this. But argue it out for yourselves on your way home.

Then see how stage lighting was used in this movie, and compare it, for instance, with the lighting in the mystery film you saw last week. Can you learn any principle which is applicable to your writing? Sunlight for cheerfulness, fog for mystery, long rains for tedium, storm for adventure, bright artificial light for merriment and revelry, shaded lamps for home life, glamor, and sophistication—

you can think of dozens of such useful associations. Play with the idea of using such effects, not to reinforce the mood you wish to convey to the reader, but as a vivid, even ironical, contrast. The added blithness of the heroine singing, despite the rain; the peculiar horror of foul murder in a peaceful sunny garden; the storm outside emphasizing the snug, almost smug, comfort of a chair before the hearth, as in the traditional poem *Snow-Bound*.

Stage and screen are yours to rip apart and analyze and discuss. And don't miss the chance of using your collaborator's mind to stimulate your own. Another movie may give you a new bone to gnaw and wrangle over, perhaps the close-up for emphasis. The old ultra close-up, showing two-gallon tears welling from eyes the size of factory windows, was killed by the talkies. It was overemphasis and, like overemphasis in writing, evoked the public's critical sense. But magnification within reason, in order to magnify emotional effect, is still used.

Yes, you can emphasize by using stronger nouns and verbs, or, with caution, adjectives and adverbs. You can use telling pauses and, oh, lots of things. But do these correspond exactly with the close-up? They don't.

There's a trick you may use unconsciously, which seems to be nearer to the magnifying-glass idea. When your hero or heroine is under special stress or emotion, you cut out extraneous impressions and concentrate on him or her in detail, in much more detail than you normally stop to use. You note down the precise way fingers fiddle with a button until it surely will come off. You note the exact intonations of the voice, the trembling of a lip, the stain on torn overalls. Can you use this consciously? Perhaps, if you analyze it carefully and find that it does not take up too

much space nor slow down the pace too much. Movie magnification need not slow things down at all. There it has an advantage over the writer.

By the way, there's the consoling thought that you can probably learn more from a bad movie than from a really good one. Like a good pool player, a good director makes the game look easy, and does things so smoothly that it is difficult to see detail, and where this method is used and where that. Also, your interest will be taken by the unfolding story and not by the way in which it is being produced.

The same is true of a stage play. The better the actors, the harder it is to see the structure and weaknesses of the play. They will smooth over the crankiest bit of stilted prose and make it sound natural. They will gloss over improbabilities, tone down exaggerated phrasing, pep up banalities with voice and action. Unless you are yourself an actor, you will learn more from the second-raters.

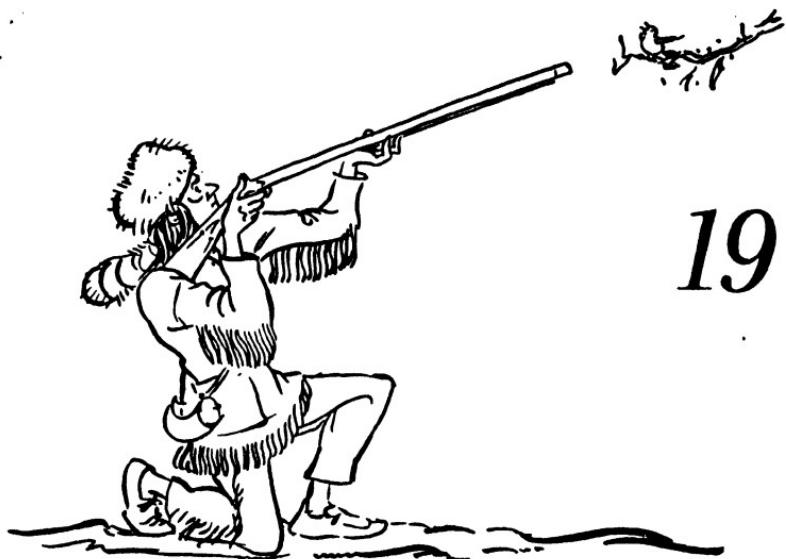
In your examination of other writer's books the conditions are dissimilar. You have read hundreds of books for every play you've seen. You yourself have spoken thousands of sentences for every foot of movie film you may have seen. You yourself are sufficiently trained to words to be able to study the technique of any living writer. So take any book you like and find out why you like it. Note how you think the author works the trick of getting your attention at the beginning of a chapter, and what methods he prefers for suspense and teasers, to carry your interest on to the end. When you strike a problem in your own work, see how the other fellow solves it.

We've only one suggestion about your reading: read what interests you. You will get more out of such reading,

but don't dodge books which seem difficult. Take a chance on them, even if, as occasionally happens, they're forbiddingly labeled "classics." Storytelling wasn't invented by this year's best-selling author.

The big public library which requires that you send demand notes down to the basement won't help you in this sort of browsing. And if your own home has a room called a library with two walls covered with books, you're the very rare and fortunate exception. For most of us the best bet is to hunt up a smallish library with open shelves, where the reach-down method is permitted. Be as ingratiating as you can to the librarian, sample everything from the Talmud to Tarzan, and go back to your collaborator with your latest haul. "That guy Burroughs has got something! Say, listen here . . ."

Finally, editors in the children's book field will often find time, if they think you are worth it, to offer constructive suggestions. Their interests are yours, viz., to produce a book which will really sell. So listen to such suggestions and consider them carefully. Make your editor your collaborator too!



## *Aiming at a Market*

IN THE chapter on "The Tools You Work With" we have given you some ideas on sending out manuscripts. The marketing of juveniles is, on the whole, much easier, pleasanter, and less complicated than the marketing of adult fiction, provided, of course, that you have the right goods to deliver.

One way to have the right goods is to ask your librarian. The young woman who runs the juvenile room of your local library, or the head of the school library, will be sure to have some pet book which she is keen to have written and on her shelves. She will say to you, as they have said to us, "Why has no one written anything to tell children about so and so?"

She may, of course, be wrong. It is possible that that field is already well filled by two or three recent books which she doesn't know about. But as a rule librarians keep up with the new books, and if she says there is a need for that book she is likely to be right. It would be well, if the subject interests you and you know anything about it, to scout round and see if she is right. Sometimes the need for such books is already known. A big bookshop told at least a score of authors that a book on Egypt was badly needed. They were right, it was. The next season there were six; the season after, only one. Fortunately, our own on Egypt came out the year after the six. It was interesting that none of the six were at all alike, nor even for the same age group, each writer tackling the problem from his own individual angle.

There is no way of telling whether other writers are working on your pet subject; such things seem to be in the air, and one season will often see several writers covering the same subject, out of whom the best man wins. But if you have written at all, even if you haven't written much, any good juvenile editor will be glad to tell you whether the subject in which you are deeply interested is, to her knowledge, now being written. If you can tell her what your special qualifications are for writing on that particular subject, she will be more interested.

It is well not to pick ground that has been too well trodden. We were among the first to start on the vocational stories, with the Cynthia art-school group. Ancient Crete was a wide open subject when we began to work on it, and our own particular experience with archeology turned us toward it. West Africa was also another vacant subject, and on that we could write with particular au-

thority. Eva Knox Evans's books on the very young American Negro have been successful as much because there was a real need for them as for their excellent style and the full background from which she gathered her material. There is always more room among the books for older juveniles, since these take longer to write and require a wider range of skill, and also because the writer of the older juvenile is apt to slide out into adult fiction, not to return. Rachel Field is an example of this.

The most important question in marketing is "To Whom Do You Sell?"

The first sale is to the editor. This is the first and also the last sale which is made almost entirely on the merit of the story. Hereafter few purchase your book on firsthand knowledge.

The next sale is to the publisher's salesman. If you are a beginner, with no name as yet in the juvenile field, your book will receive consideration because it is published by the salesman's firm. But he will judge its merits on the good looks of the dummy, the type of story, and the title. The only thing you have supplied is the title. This should, of course, be attractive. It should also be simple and one which cannot be mispronounced even by the most ingenious. The salesman will have to refer to the title many hundreds of times, and he doesn't want to be told alternately that "Llama" is pronounced "Yama," but that it is called "Lama" by all unaffected Americans.

Sales to bookshops are made on much the same grounds as those which commend or condemn a book to the salesman. Though at this point we begin to get the confusion of the buyer trying to guess what parents will think.

Sales to school and public libraries are made largely on reviews of your book published in newspapers and in trade journals.

Sales to parents and Christmas-present-giving adults are made by personal recommendation of those who stand behind the counter in the book departments of general stores; by the recommendations of Parent-Teacher Association groups and of Catholic and other religious groups; and, possibly to a still greater extent, by the appearance of the title and jacket. Few parents read a book before buying, and few parents spread the sale of a juvenile, as they did of *Gone with the Wind*, by asking their acquaintances if they have read it.

Few books sell in the first instance to the boys and girls for whom they are written. But resales, due to wear and tear of books in the libraries, depend almost entirely on whether you have written a good story.

In sum, we juvenile writers must admit that the first sales of our first book aren't necessarily due to any great excellence of our writing. But the replacement sales which will make our royalties extend from year to year are almost exclusively our own responsibility. And, of course, the reception of any of our later books by editor, by salesman, by bookshops, by librarians, and by boys and girls, will depend increasingly on how good our previous books were. Though it is doubtful if many parents can remember the name of a juvenile writer from one Christmas to the next.





